

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF THE CHESS GRANDMASTER





in

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OF THE
CHESS GRANDMASTER**

An old and seemingly worthless chess set is auctioned off for a surprisingly large sum of money. Shortly afterwards, the buyer meets with an accident and the item goes missing. Baffled by the surprising turn of events, The Three Investigators set off to search for the chess set. Soon, it becomes apparent that they are not the only ones out to get this inconspicuous item. What secret does it hold? Jupiter, Pete and Bob then come across the story of a grandmaster who disappeared in a mysterious way in the seventies.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Chess Grandmaster

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Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Die Spur des Spielers

(The Three ???: The Trail of the Player)

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(2013)

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(2021-07-18)

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1. Under the Hammer

“Twenty dollars! The current bid is twenty dollars! Twenty dollars for this splendid old mirror from Europe. Do I hear more? Think, ladies and gentlemen, whose faces it may once have reflected! Countesses and princes, queens and emperors... who knows what history this noble piece has! So, does anyone want to bid more than twenty dollars? ... No one? All right! Twenty dollars going once... twenty dollars going twice... and twenty dollars sold!” Titus Jones let the mallet whiz on the surface of the lectern. “Sold to the lady with the hat. Congratulations!”

The buyer rose from her chair, stepped forward and paid the amount due to Aunt Mathilda who was sitting behind a desk next to the lectern. Bob Andrews wrapped the mirror in paper for protection and handed it to the lady. She thanked him and returned to her seat.

Bob let his gaze wander over the sunlit salvage yard. He couldn't remember ever seeing it so full of people. Jupiter's aunt Mathilda had complained a few weeks ago that The Jones Salvage Yard, as it was officially called, was slowly bursting at the seams. She had suggested a special sale, but then Uncle Titus had come up with the idea of an auction. It would attract even more customers and be a great advertisement for the business.

Aunt Mathilda had spent days chasing her nephew and his two friends Bob and Pete around the salvage yard, tidying up and at the same time picking out interesting pieces for the auction. The main aim was to get rid of slow-moving items. These had been carefully mixed with real eye-catchers so that people didn't get the feeling that only junk was going under the hammer. The four of them had selected more than two hundred items from all sorts of things that the salvage yard had to offer. That included an old gramophone, baskets of collector's cups, a mannequin, furniture from a theatre, stone figures for the garden, an antique typewriter, and the mirror that had just been sold.

Now all the things were placed under Bob's supervision on several tables so that people could look at them at their leisure before bidding. Further back, Jupiter and Pete were selling coffee, cold drinks, hot dogs and home-made muffins.

On the yard itself, they had set up eighty chairs, almost all of which were occupied. Even more people were standing under the parasols at the edge. A few children from the neighbourhood even sat on top of the wooden fence that enclosed the area to be able to see better. The auction was a great success!

Aunt Mathilda was blissfully happy. A few flower vases, the old shellac records and the hideous clown puppet collection had already found new owners. They hadn't brought in much money, but that wasn't so important. The main thing was that the stuff was finally gone!

While Uncle Titus was auctioning the next item—a white and orange floor lamp from the sixties—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a sports bag in his hand came up to Bob at the exhibition tables. He was wearing a red baseball cap and, under his half-closed hooded jacket, a white T-shirt with a logo printed on it, but it was impossible to make it out clearly. His eyes were hidden behind mirrored sunglasses. Bob spontaneously had to think of his sports teacher.

The man put the bag on the ground and looked closely at a chess set and pieces on the table. It was a simple but very beautiful set, made entirely of wood. There was a storage compartment located below the chess board. Bob had placed a few chess pieces on the board for display purposes.

"I want this chess set," the man said after a while. "How much is it?"

"That remains to be seen," Bob explained. "With a bit of luck, you might even get it for a dollar when it is auctioned off. But my guess is that a few more people will bid. How much it will sell for in the end, I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"I want to buy it right now, though."

"I'm sorry sir, but we can't do that," Bob replied. "All items here are for auction today."

"I'll pay fifty dollars."

"That would probably be a good price, but there were a few other people eyeing it earlier. One person asked me the same question and I had to tell him the same thing."

"Really?" the man asked attentively. "Who?"

"The elderly gentleman at the back there," Bob replied, pointing to a short, slender man with an old-fashioned hat and glasses who, despite the warmth, was dressed in a coat and sitting in the back row of chairs.

"It wouldn't be fair if I sold you the chess set now," Bob continued. But the man, who looked like a sports teacher, didn't seem to have listened to him at all.

"How about you don't auction it off and we'll negotiate again later when everything is finished here," the man suggested.

"Then I would get into trouble with Mr Jones," Bob pointed at Uncle Titus in an attempt to end the conversation.

Titus had just finished with the floor lamp. He looked at his list of items and then announced: "Let's move on to the next item—this wonderful wooden chess set!" Titus Jones gave Bob a sign.

"Now you can bid for it," Bob said to the sports teacher. He carefully lifted the chess board with the few chess pieces on it and placed it on a raised platform next to the lectern so that everyone had a good view of them. When he returned to the exhibition table, the sports teacher had already sat down on the nearest free chair.

"The chess pieces are hand-carved," Titus announced. "Maybe this set once belonged to a Russian grandmaster! How about the first bid?"

"A dollar!" shouted a boy Bob knew from school.

"Five dollars!" He was immediately outbid by a young man at the very back.

"Five dollars it is," Uncle Titus repeated.

"Six dollars!" the boy shouted.

"Ten!" the young man shouted.

Bob smiled. That started promisingly.

The old, lanky man in the coat, sitting in the last row, raised his walking stick. "Twenty dollars!"

"Aha, I see we have a few chess lovers in the audience," Uncle Titus said delightedly.

Now the sports teacher also started to bid: "Thirty!"

"Thirty-five!" said a young woman in the middle.

"Forty!" said the old gentleman in the coat.

"Fifty!" That was the young man again.

"Six—" the old man raised his cane, but he was immediately interrupted.

"—One hundred dollars!" the sports teacher yelled.

A murmur went through the crowd. The chess set was really beautiful and certainly worth something... but a hundred dollars?

"This is getting interesting!" Uncle Titus commented on what was happening. "The current bid is one hundred dollars, ladies and gentlemen! Do I hear—"

"Two hundred!" the old man offered.

Now the first spectators turned to take a look at the man who seemed to want the chess set at all costs. The younger man waved it off, indicating that he would not bid any further. Now it was clear that only the old man and the sports teacher were still in the running.

"Two hundred and fifty!" said the latter.

"Three hundred!"

"Four hundred!"

"Five hundred!"

"A thousand!"

Now there was no stopping them. Everyone whispered to each other. Bob caught questioning glances from Jupe and Pete. Nothing was happening at the refreshment stand. The people who had been queuing there had lost all interest in hot dogs and muffins. Everyone was watching the bidding duel between the two men.

Jupiter signalled to Bob. Both of them left their positions and met halfway at Aunt Mathilda's cash desk.

"Bob, something is wrong here," Jupiter murmured to him. "This chess set is never worth a thousand dollars."

"I thought so too."

"Yet these two fellows are bidding their heads off. There's something fishy going on."

"One thousand two hundred dollars!" Uncle Titus just announced loudly.

"If Uncle Titus sells the set for a thousand and two hundred dollars, it might turn out to be worth a lot more," Jupiter continued. "We have to stop this somehow!"

"Nothing is gonna stop here!" hissed Aunt Mathilda from her place behind the table. She had got frantic red marks on her face and was beside herself. "This is the deal of the year, okay? Back to your seat, Jupiter Jones, people want to buy muffins!"

"But at the moment nobody at all wants—"

"They will—once you get back there!" Aunt Mathilda's imperious tone tolerated no dissent. Jupe resigned himself to his fate and reluctantly returned to the refreshment stand. Bob also took his place again.

"One thousand five hundred dollars from the gentleman in the coat!" repeated Uncle Titus.

"Two thousand!" shouted the sports teacher.

"Two thousand three hundred!"

"Two thousand five hundred!"

The bids climbed and climbed. Uncle Titus was by now as frantic as Aunt Mathilda. Bob turned his attention to the two opponents.

With his old-fashioned hat and nickel glasses, the old man looked like a bank clerk from the fifties. Bob began to sweat just looking at the coat. The gentleman was visibly nervous and kept dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. Every time he was outdone, he cast a half-anxious, half-outraged glance towards his opponent.

The sports teacher, in turn, strove for composure, but the anger was clearly visible on his face, despite the reflective sunglasses. Bob could see his forehead turning red even from a distance.

Neither of them gave the impression of throwing in the towel any time soon.

The current bid was three thousand dollars. Then the old man's collar seemed to burst. "I bid four thousand dollars!" he shouted so loudly that his voice cracked.

In the meantime, no one murmured any more. Breathless silence reigned in the salvage yard.

"The current bid is four thousand dollars," Uncle Titus repeated. "Well, the gentleman on the far right, will you have another go?"

The sports teacher did not make a face.

Uncle Titus waited a few more seconds. "It seems like the limit has been reached. So four thousand dollars going once... four thousand dollars going twice... and four thousand dollars going—"

"Five thousand!" shouted the sports teacher.

Then it was over again with the breathless silence. The visitors were talking excitedly to each other.

"Can you please repeat that again, sir?" asked Uncle Titus.

"Five thousand dollars!"

"Five and a half!" the old man shouted and rose, leaning on his walking stick.

"Six," growled the sports teacher.

"Six and a half!"

"Six thousand seven hundred."

"Seven thousand!"

The sports teacher was grimly silent.

"Seven thousand!" the old man repeated.

"I heard you, sir," Uncle Titus assured him. "Seven thousand dollars, then, for this truly unique spectacle—er—chess set! Do I hear more?"

The sports teacher was still silent.

"Seven thousand dollars going once..."

Bob tried to gauge whether the sports teacher would once again raise his hand.

"... Seven thousand dollars going twice... and if no one else comes forward... then I will raise the gavel and really and truly say... seven thousand dollars... sold!" Titus Jones hit the lectern so hard with the gavel that a dent was left in the sound block.

Cheers erupted in the salvage yard. People applauded the exciting show they had been given. In the midst of the storm of applause, the sports teacher stood up so hastily that his chair toppled over. Full of rage, he grabbed his bag, stomped off and left the salvage yard without turning around again. Bob saw Jupiter try to address him on his way out, but the man did not respond to him at all.

The winner of the bidding duel, in turn, rushed forward to the sales table as fast as he could with his stick.

"Well, I think this is the ideal opportunity for a little break," Uncle Titus announced, dabbing the sweat from his forehead. "We'll resume in twenty minutes!" Chairs were moved and in no time, Pete and Jupiter were again busy at the refreshment stand.

When the buyer finally stood in front of Aunt Mathilda's table, Bob and Uncle Titus also joined him.

"Well, that was interesting, eh?" said Aunt Mathilda with a smile. She was the only one who seemed completely relaxed as if it were the norm for such sums to pass across the table at The Jones Salvage Yard. "May I offer you a cup of coffee? It's on the house."

"No, thank you. I'd rather pay now." He looked around as if afraid someone would steal the chess set from him. "By credit card, if you don't mind. I wasn't prepared for that amount."

“Of course,” Aunt Mathilda replied, beaming and stood up. “Please accompany me to the office.”

“I’m going too!” said Bob quickly.

“Nothing doing. You wrap up the chess set for the nice gentleman,” Aunt Mathilda instructed. “But be careful, you hear!”

Bob resigned himself to his fate. He proceeded to carefully place the chess pieces one by one into the storage compartment that was lined with black felt. Then he attached the chess board on top of the storage compartment and used bubble wrap to cover the set. He took his time and was not quite finished when Aunt Mathilda returned with the customer. He was putting his credit card back into his wallet with shaky fingers. Bob still managed to see the name on the card: ‘Bishop Blake’.

He looked at Mr Blake more closely. He was older than Bob had guessed at a distance, certainly in his late seventies, and was no taller than Bob himself. His coat flapped around his thin body. The thick lenses of his nickel glasses made his eyes look very small.

Bob cleared his throat as he placed the chess set in a bigger cardboard box. “Sir, I’d like to know what actually makes this chess set so valuable. I never expected anyone to offer so much for it.”

Mr Blake looked over his shoulder, leaned over to Bob and murmured: “It’s better if you don’t know.”

“Oh,” said Bob, puzzled. “And why is that?”

The man gave him a look that was difficult to interpret, but did not answer, instead he reached out for the cardboard box.

“Do you need a bag?” asked Bob.

“No, thank you. I’m fine. I have to go now.” Bishop Blake tucked the box under his right arm, used his left hand for the cane and turned around without giving Aunt Mathilda, Uncle Titus or Bob another glance. As inconspicuously as possible, he tried to get pass the crowd towards the main gate. As he did so, two or three people tried to accost him about his spectacular purchase, but he fled from them like a harassed animal and left the salvage yard premises in a hurry.

Titus Jones sighed. “Well, that was something!”

“Indeed...” Bob agreed. “Can you explain that, Mr Jones? Seven thousand dollars for a chess set! That’s madness!”

“That just goes to show that it’s always worth stopping by The Jones Salvage Yard!” said Aunt Mathilda firmly. “You can discover real treasures here! That was the best advertising we could get!”

“Yes, but—” That was as far as Bob got.

A horrible squeal of brakes sounded just outside the yard, followed by a dull bang. Everyone had heard it, everyone paused.

“Something happened on the street!” someone shouted.

Jupiter and Pete, who were close to the main gate with their refreshment stand, dropped everything and ran out. Bob hurried after them, but by the time he had finally made his way out to the street, a crowd had already formed at the nearest intersection.

Bob grasped the situation with a glance—ugly black skid marks were emblazoned on the road surface. Where they ended, a man was lying on the ground. The car that had left the marks was nowhere to be seen. Bob rushed to the victim. Jupiter and Pete were already kneeling beside him. It was Mr Blake.

Pete had pulled out his mobile phone and was already talking to the emergency call centre. Blake, in turn, blinked around disoriented, looked into Jupiter’s face, mumbled

something to him that Bob couldn't hear. Then the elderly man lost consciousness.

Bob looked around helplessly. Not only was there no trace of the perpetrator and his car. The cardboard box with the chess set had also disappeared!

2. A Nagging Feeling

The ambulance arrived quickly and Mr Blake was immediately taken to the hospital. The police were there to take witness statements, but no one had directly witnessed the accident. Only Derek, a boy from the neighbourhood, spoke to the police officers at some length. The Three Investigators were also questioned, but they could not contribute anything decisive.

Uncle Titus stopped the auction. But then a reporter from *Rocky Beach Today* turned up and interviewed Uncle Titus and many of the guests about the incident. So it was over an hour later when the last people had left the salvage yard in muffled whispers and Aunt Mathilda could finally close the big entrance gate with a loud sigh.

Exhausted, all five settled down on the verandah, looked at the deserted rows of chairs and fell into brooding silence.

"When Mr Blake passed out, I thought he was dead," Pete said into the silence.

Jupe nodded. "But then I found his pulse... Luckily the ambulance came very quickly."

"Shouldn't we do something?" asked Aunt Mathilda. "Call the man's family? They'll be worried if he doesn't come home!"

"The hospital will take care of that," Uncle Titus said, "or the police."

"But what if they don't?"

"Calm down, Mathilda, I'm sure the authorities will take care of everything."

But Aunt Mathilda was completely distraught. "Such a terrible accident right on our doorstep! And it was supposed to be a beautiful day. And then someone commits a hit-and-run! What a terrible world we live in!"

Pete, Bob and Jupiter glanced at each other unobtrusively. The Three Investigators were already well ahead in their thoughts. But should they really tell Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus?

Jupiter finally decided to go for it and said: "It wasn't an accident."

"Excuse me?" asked Aunt Mathilda.

"Mr Blake was deliberately hit by a car," Jupe said.

"But Jupe!" His aunt was indignant. "Now don't get carried away with your crime fantasies again! Just because you three boys are fond of playing investigators doesn't mean that evil is lurking everywhere."

"Firstly, dear aunt, just twenty seconds ago, you were the one lamenting the terrible world we live in... and secondly, the chess set has disappeared."

"What do you mean by that?" Uncle Titus enquired.

"The box Bob gave Mr Blake was gone," Jupe explained. "Whoever hit him took the box."

"And that makes a particular person very suspicious," Bob said.

"The other bidder who wanted the set," Pete said.

"The sports teacher," Jupiter added.

"How do you know he's a sports teacher?" murmured Pete.

"I don't know, but he looks like he could be one," Jupiter murmured back.

Mathilda Jones slapped her hand over her mouth. "Do you really think so? But that would be outrageous!"

“And that is why we have to investigate this matter,” Jupe explained. “I suggest we go straight to the hospital and question Mr Blake. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knows the sports teacher. At the same time, we should find out what makes the chess set so desirable. Uncle Titus, where did you actually get it?”

“Wait a minute!” Aunt Mathilda intervened and raised her hands admonishingly. “You will not investigate anything at all, do you understand me, Jupiter Jones?”

“But why—”

“Because I said so! For goodness’ sake, a person almost gets killed on our doorstep and all you boys can think of is an... investigation?” She spat out the word like a spoiled food.

Pete tentatively raised his finger. “Actually, it only occurred to Jupe...”

“It doesn’t matter!” Mathilda rumbled. “You will now dismantle the chairs, clean up the salvage yard and stow away the coffee machine, then you won’t get any stupid ideas... Period!” She rose in a sudden, slammed her glass of water on the tray and stomped back into the office.

Since Uncle Titus was still there, no one dared to say anything. But Jupiter’s uncle spoke up: “Don’t hold it against her. She was already upset about how the auction ended. The accident has completely upset her... me too, by the way.”

“So where did you get the chess set?” asked Jupiter.

Titus Jones raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you hear your aunt?”

“Yes, I did, but I thought—”

Uncle Titus looked up at the sky, resigned to his fate. “Oh well, I can’t talk you out of it after all. The days when you listened to your aunt and me are long gone, aren’t they? ... If there ever were... All right, the chess set came from a house clearance I did last week. The owner’s name was Irene Hammontree and she passed away a week ago. Her neighbour, Eudora Kretchmer, hired me to do the liquidation.”

“Eudora Kretchmer from the Rocky Beach Women’s Club?” Pete rolled his eyes. “My goodness!”

“You know her?” asked Uncle Titus.

“Who doesn’t know her?” Pete remarked.

“We dealt with her once during a case,” Bob explained. “What were her daughters’ names again? Prudence and Purity?”

Jupiter laughed. “Chastity and Charity. But tell me, Uncle Titus, if Mrs Hammontree died only a week ago, it was very quick with the house clearance. Isn’t that a bit... disrespectful?”

Titus Jones smiled mischievously. “You’d best ask Mrs Kretchmer herself.”

“And how much did you pay for the chess set?”

“We worked out a complete price for the house contents. That was a completely normal price, nothing special at all, if that’s what you mean.”

“Hmm... that doesn’t sound like Mrs Kretchmer had any idea of how much the chess set would fetch,” Jupe surmised. “We should question her anyway. I’m sure she can tell us more about Irene Hammontree. Maybe that will help us find out what makes the chess set so valuable.”

“I’m looking forward to that,” Pete muttered unenthusiastically.

“You’re still lazing around!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice came through the open window from the kitchen. “Do you have something stuck in your ears?”

Jupiter cleared his throat and pushed himself out of his chair. “Aunt Mathilda’s petulance will be followed by unpleasant sanctions if we do not comply with her request promptly, fellas. Better we submit to her dictates.”

Pete rolled his eyes at Jupiter's screwed expression, but stood up together with Bob. They set to work putting the chairs together while Uncle Titus was kind enough to help them dismantle the refreshment stand. Nevertheless, it was already dark when they finally finished their work. They removed the last traces of the auction by the light of some old spotlights that Uncle Titus had bought from a movie studio. Exhausted to death, The Three Investigators decided to postpone all further investigations until the next morning.

"... Or until the cows come home," Pete suggested. "Who knows if Mr Blake can tell us anything at all. And Mrs Kretchmer... she talks a lot when the day is long, but she probably doesn't know anything at all."

"We have a third lead..." Jupiter announced. "Sam Chiccarelli."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Bob.

"Who?" asked Pete.

"Sam Chiccarelli... I assume that is someone's name—however you spell it. That was what Bishop Blake whispered to me before he lost consciousness."

3. The Witness to the Accident

The next day, Bob and Jupiter were the first to arrive at Headquarters. This was the secret office of The Three Investigators, which they had set up in an old mobile home trailer hidden under scrap metal and equipped over time with whatever the salvage yard had to offer.

Jupe and Bob sat in two old, dusty, but extremely cosy armchairs and waited for Pete. He finally rumbled through one of their secret entrances—the Cold Gate. It was an old refrigerator that stood, as if by chance, on the edge of the mountain of scrap metal, and through the back wall of which one could pass and enter a tunnel which led to the trailer.

“Bad news,” Pete announced. “I can’t join you today, at least not right away, but only this afternoon.”

“Why not?” Jupiter enquired, slightly annoyed.

“Because I’m mowing the lawn at the Robertsons today.”

“And it has to be today?”

“That was the deal. I forgot about it yesterday.”

The First Investigator scowled. “So mowing the lawn is more important to you than our investigation work.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “My goodness, I need the job because I need the money, and I need it for my car... and we need the car for our investigation. Surely you’ve noticed that. So technically, I’m mowing the lawn for us, not for me. Besides, I couldn’t do anything with Mrs Kretchmer anyway. She doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone,” Bob said.

“All right, then mow the lawn,” Jupiter interjected. “Tell me, the Robertsons, they live very close to the hospital, don’t they?”

Pete nodded.

“Then you can check on Mr Blake on the way there and ask him if he knows who hit him, what the chess set is about and so on.”

“On my way back,” Pete said, glancing at his watch. “Because I’m already late now. See you then!” And Pete was already outside again.

“I have a job for you too, Bob,” Jupe said. “You’re going to Mrs Kretchmer’s.”

Bob rolled his eyes. “What? Me? Alone? Why?”

“This is an important lead!”

“And what are you going to do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’ll take care of answering the question of who or what Sam Chiccarelli is.”

Bob screwed up his face. “That actually sounds more like a job for me, though. Records and research is under Bob Andrews, remember?”

“Vaguely.”

“You used to insist on that, Jupe.”

“Because you had a broken leg and were good for nothing else. The leg has long since healed.”

“I like research.”

“But Mrs Kretchmer doesn’t like me,” Jupiter countered.

"She doesn't like anyone," Bob reminded him and continued extremely firmly: "You go to Mrs Kretchmer, I'll take care of what I've always taken care of."

"No."

"We'll toss for it."

"All right."

They tossed a coin. Bob won.

Ten minutes later, Jupiter reluctantly left the trailer, swung even more reluctantly onto his bike and left the salvage yard. Three houses down the street, he spotted Derek, the neighbourhood boy who had talked to the police the day before. Derek was playing basketball with himself, trying to shoot to the hoop over the garage door.

"Hello Derek!" Jupiter greeted the boy, who was a few years younger than himself, and cycled towards him.

"Hi Jupe!" exclaimed Derek delightedly, dropping the ball instantly and reaching for a newspaper lying on the grass. "Have you seen this yet? We're all in the papers!"

Jupiter gave him a questioning look.

"Quite a big article in *Rocky Beach Today*—about your uncle and the auction and the chess set and the accident and everything!" Derek held the newspaper under Jupe's nose.

Jupe skimmed the text. The bidding war was of course a welcome story for the Sunday edition and would probably have appeared in any case. However, the fact that it was followed by a hit-and-run accident had pushed the story onto page one.

"And here they mentioned me!" said Derek proudly, pointing to a paragraph at the end of the article:

... The only witness to the accident, a boy from the neighbourhood, gave the police some pertinent information, which, by the time we went to press, had not yet led to the perpetrator being caught...

"And that's what I wanted to talk to you about," Jupe said. "What exactly did you see? Did you really see the accident?"

"Well, not exactly. But I had a good view because I was sitting on the fence."

"So you were one of them!" Jupiter remembered the children who had climbed on top of the salvage yard fence and watched the auction.

"Yes, but I was looking in the wrong direction and only looked around when there was a bang. And then I wasn't fast enough with the camera either, because I had to turn around and was afraid I would fall off."

"Wait a minute," Jupiter snapped, "did you just say 'camera'?"

"Yeah, sure, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to show the police anything."

"You filmed the accident?"

"Actually I was filming the auction," Derek replied and started dribbling with his basketball again. "When they got to a thousand dollars, I took out my mobile phone and filmed it from there, thinking it could get exciting... and it did. I kept filming until after the auction and I was just about to turn it off when there was a bang. Then I managed to record the car, a dark Pontiac, but I can't make out the licence plate number. The police already have the video. They're trying to get the picture sharper somehow."

Jupiter thought back to the bang he had heard from the salvage yard, in particular the roaring engine. Suddenly he felt as if he was missing something in all this... but the feeling just disappeared. "Could I have the video too?"

“Are you investigating the case?”

Jupiter nodded.

“Cool. Will you let me join in? After all, I filmed it all!”

Jupiter, who was anything but thrilled by this, fortunately quickly thought of the appropriate answer: “If you want, you can accompany me.”

Derek dropped the ball and beamed. “Really?”

“Yes. I’m going to Mrs Kretchmer’s.”

The glow went out. “Mrs Kretchmer from the Women’s Club?”

Jupiter nodded with a weighty expression. “She’s involved in the case and I’ll probably spend half the day talking to her.”

Derek pursed his mouth in disgust. “Okay, I see. You know what, I better play some more basketball. I’m going to be a professional basketball player. It’s definitely a lot more money than being an investigator.”

“Without a doubt,” Jupe agreed.

Derek ran into the house where he quickly transferred the video clip to a USB drive. He gave it to Jupiter. “You can give it back to me another day.”

The First Investigator nodded. “Will do. Thank you, Derek!”

The boy turned back to his basketball while Jupiter continued on his way. He crossed the intersection where the accident had happened. Next to two parked cars, the skid marks were still clearly visible.

Jupiter frowned. Again, the feeling that something was not right was brushing against him. Again he could not grasp it.

4. A Visit to the Hospital

When the automatic doors opened and the Second Investigator entered the lobby of the Rocky Beach Hospital, he was greeted by pleasantly cool air. He had hurried to mow the lawn and was correspondingly sweaty. There were grass stains on his jeans—not exactly ideal for visiting patients, but there was nothing he could do about that now. He ran a makeshift brush through his hair before stepping up to the reception desk. There sat a middle-aged woman with black hair and brown eyes, from which she eyed him sceptically. Pete saw the name written on the small tag on her white coat—‘Maria Esposito’.

“Excuse me, I’m here to see Mr Bishop Blake. He was admitted yesterday.”

The receptionist turned wordlessly to her computer and tapped away on the keyboard for a while before saying: “Mr Blake can’t have visitors yet.” At this, her look was so reproachful, as if it was Pete’s fault.

“Is he that bad?” Pete asked.

“He was hit by a car,” Maria Esposito replied without making a face.

“Yes, of course, I... How bad is he?”

“Are you a relative?”

“No.”

“Then I can’t give any information about him.”

“But I’m kind of his relative!” Pete added, trying hard to make it sound like he was about to tell her anyway.

Mrs Esposito’s look remained reproachful, only her left eyebrow rose slightly. “What kind of a relative?”

“A relative by marriage. I am the son of the wife of the... cousin... of Mr Blake. He’s my distant uncle... Uncle Bishop—that’s what I call him... although he’s not really my uncle at all.” Pete smiled his best nice-boy-next-door smile.

“I understand... sort of. So, your not-really-uncle isn’t really well, but I’m afraid I can’t let you see him now.” She obviously didn’t believe a word he said.

“Is he in intensive care?”

Her left eyebrow rose a little more. That was all it took for an answer.

“Okay,” Pete murmured meekly, “then... maybe I’ll come back tomorrow...”

“Or the day after tomorrow,” Mrs Esposito suggested. “That’s my day off. Maybe you’ll have better luck then.”

Pete nodded, turned and left. Standing outside the glass door, he was unsure what to do. Jupe would not let him get away with a visit to the hospital without results. Either Pete would have to think of a convincing excuse or try to get through to Mr Blake somehow. But how?

While the Second Investigator was thinking about it, out of the corner of his eye, he suddenly noticed hectic activity behind the glass door.

An orderly had appeared at Mrs Esposito’s reception and was talking to her. She suddenly dropped everything and left her post.

It’s now or never!

Pete returned to the lobby, headed for the counter and looked around. Apart from a few patients gazing absently out of the window in a small sitting area, there was no one around.

The Second Investigator crept around the counter and glanced at the computer screen. He was in luck. The page with Bishop Blake's record was still open. He hurriedly skimmed the information until he found the room number—Ward 3, Room 11.

He left the counter, glanced at the signs hanging from the ceiling and hurried off.

A few minutes later, he had reached Ward 3. He walked briskly and in a short time, he found Room 11. This was it! Pete looked around again, but there was no one in the corridor except him. Carefully, he pushed down the handle and slipped through the door.

It was a single room. In a large white bed lay a small man with white hair, whom Pete hardly recognized as Bishop Blake without his glasses and hat. But the clipboard at the foot of the bed told him that the patient was whom he was looking for.

Mr Blake was asleep. An IV tube was sticking out of his forearm. The bedside table was empty except for Mr Blake's glasses. There were no flowers or cards. Apparently he had not had a visitor yet.

Indecisively, Pete stood at the foot of the bed, looking at the sleeping man and felt uncomfortable. What should he do now? Wake him up? Was he allowed to do that? What if Mr Blake immediately rang for the nurse? Or was he too weak for that?

Pete had to do something, so he pulled up a chair and sat down at Mr Blake's bedside. Then he said quietly: "Mr Blake? Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

"Mr Blake?" Pete tried louder.

Bishop Blake's eyelids began to flutter. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

"How are you, Mr Blake?" Pete tried to draw attention. "Please don't be alarmed. I am here because I want to ask you something. Can you talk?"

"Who... are you?" Blake mumbled in a weak voice.

Pete took out his wallet, pulled out one of their business cards but hesitated. As Mr Blake still looked unconscious, Pete wasn't sure whether he should introduce himself as an investigator. He then placed his wallet and the card on the bedside table.

"My name is Pete Crenshaw," Pete said. "I was at the auction yesterday. I'm a friend of the boy who packed the chess set for you. Do you know what happened after you left the auction?"

Blake frowned. "A car... hit me."

"That's right sir, do you remember the accident?"

Mr Blake closed his eyes. Whether out of weakness or to recall his memory, Pete was unable to say.

"There was a terrible bang..." the old man slowly said. "I was knocked down... that's all I know."

"Did you see the car or the driver?"

"No." Blake turned his gaze to the bedside table. "My glasses..." Pete handed them to him and raised the head of the hospital bed so that Mr Blake could sit upright. Irritated, Blake looked around the room. "The chess set... where is it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. That's why I'm here. The chess set was gone."

Blake's eyes snapped open and he gasped in shock. "Gone?"

"Please don't get upset, Mr Blake," Pete said.

"What happened to it?"

"Maybe the man who bid at the auction stole it. That's what we suspect, anyway. You see, my friends and I are investigators and we are handling this case." Pete handed their card to Mr Blake. It said:



Mr Blake only glanced at the card and then put it on the bedside table.

"I have to do something," Blake says half anxiously, half broodingly. "Urgent!"

"I'm afraid you might not be able to do anything yet," Pete remarked. "They won't release you here so quickly. But we can help you. As I said, we're already trying to track down the culprit."

Blake blinked at him through his glasses and looked at Pete for a long time, as if trying to figure out whether he could trust him. Then he nodded.

"Do you know who the man at the auction was?"

"No. I've never seen him before."

"Really? I thought his name might have been Sam Chiccarelli."

An unsteady flicker flitted across Blake's face. "Sam... Chiccarelli?"

"Yes. You whispered that name to my friend Jupiter just before you passed out."

"I don't know anyone by that name. Your friend must have misheard. Listen, boy... the chess set is important to me... very important, you understand. I must have it back."

Pete nodded. "That's what we thought... otherwise you wouldn't have paid so much money for it. It must be very valuable."

Mr Blake shook his head unwillingly. "You don't understand. It's more than valuable. My life depends on it!"

"Excuse me? Your life? But why?"

Before Mr Blake could answer, the door suddenly opened. A tall man with blond, light hair, and wearing a white doctor's coat came in. Over his rimless glasses, he looked at Pete in surprise. A strange tug played around his mouth, but that was perhaps only from the small scar that reached from his upper lip to his nose—probably the remnant of an operated cleft lip or whatever they called it in politically correct terms.

"Well, I thought Mr Blake wasn't allowed visitors yet."

"That... uh... is true," Pete said and quickly rose from his chair. "But the lady at the reception was kind enough to make an exception for me... so I could check on my... uh... uncle."

"Really? Mrs Esposito doesn't usually make exceptions."

"It's just a short visit," Pete hastily assured him. "I'm off now."

Suddenly, Bishop Blake grabbed him unexpectedly by the wrist and pulled him close. "Help me, please!" he whispered. "Find the chess set!"

Pete, noting the doctor's gaze, nodded curtly. "All right. Get well soon, Uncle Bishop. I'll be in touch soon. You can call me!" He pointed to the business card and nodded conspiratorially at the man.

"Would you then be so kind as to promptly leave the room now?" the doctor asked. Pete had the distinct feeling that he would not be able to prolong his visit much longer.

"Yes, sorry." Under the stern gaze of the doctor, he walked out of the room.

Outside in the corridor, he cursed softly to himself. A little longer and he would certainly have been able to find out more. Why did that stupid doctor have to show up now of all times? Pete wondered if he should just wait until the doctor had left. But if he was caught again, then it was probably over with the leniency and Pete would never be allowed to set foot in this hospital again.

The Second Investigator decided to give up for the day and go back to the salvage yard. But as he waited for the lift, he noticed that something was missing.

His wallet! He had been so busy making a hasty exit that he had left it on Mr Blake's bedside table. It didn't help, he had to go back again.

He turned back and decided to just scurry in quickly, grab the wallet and disappear again. Without knocking, he entered quietly—and saw the doctor bent menacingly over Mr Blake, his hands resting on the bed frame to the left and right of his head. He had not noticed Pete's entrance.

There was extreme fear in Bishop Blake's eyes as the doctor whispered to him in a voice filled with hatred: "I warn you exactly once, old man! Forget about the chess set, otherwise ___"

Bishop Blake's gaze fell over the man's shoulder to Pete and only then, the doctor realized that someone had come into the room.

5. The Twins

Eudora Kretchmer lived with her family in one of Rocky Beach's more upscale neighbourhoods in a gleaming white house with an equally gleaming white porch. In the magnificent front garden, for which Eudora Kretchmer had once won a prize, the colours virtually exploded—hydrangeas, laburnum and California lilac were in full bloom. The lawn was so meticulously cut that Jupiter thought for a second that it wasn't real at all. But of course it was.

The First Investigator smoothed his hair and took another deep breath before ringing the doorbell.

Nothing happened.

Jupiter rang the bell again.

The inner door opened and behind the fly screen appeared two girls, both about nine years old, looking exactly alike, in pink dresses and blonde pigtails.

"Hello," Jupiter said irritably. "You two must be Purity and... I mean Chastity and Charity."

"I'm Chastity," said the girl on the left. "And we're not allowed to let anyone in."

"Mum says we're not allowed to talk to anyone either," Charity added. "When you talk to strangers, it can end badly."

"You don't have to talk to me," Jupiter said, "because I actually want to see your mother."

"She's not here," Chastity said firmly, and the door was closed again.

Jupiter knocked again. Nothing moved. But Chastity and Charity were certainly still behind the door. "Where is your mother?" Jupiter asked loudly.

"At church," Chastity's voice came through the closed door.

"We can't talk to him!" her sister hissed.

"But we know him! That's the boy from the dump."

"But Chastity..." The girl lowered her voice, but Jupiter could still hear everything. "Maybe something bad will happen again like last time!"

Jupe heard the twins sneaking away from the door. They wouldn't talk to him again, he was pretty sure. The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders and was already on his way back to his bicycle when a gleaming white station wagon stopped in front of the house and the Kretchmer couple got out. Mr Kretchmer was wearing a black Sunday suit. Eudora Kretchmer was wearing a high-necked, long, cream-coloured dress that made her look even thinner than she already was. Under her white summer hat, her perm sat as if set in concrete. Over the rim of her large glasses, she eyed the First Investigator disdainfully.

"You can't just put your bike in the middle of the driveway!" were her first words instead of a greeting. "Look at the dirt on your bike. It should be cleaned right away. Hasn't your mother told you that yet? Oh, I mean your aunt, Jupiter." She turned to her husband. "You can see what happens to children when there is a lack of parental care."

"Yes, dear."

"And what Mathilda Jones thinks is an appropriate upbringing... well, we don't have to talk about that. Do you know when I last saw her in church?"

“No, dear.”

“Me neither.”

Although she had actually been speaking to her husband, it had also been loud enough for Jupiter—in fact, loud enough for her neighbours as well. Then Mrs Kretchmer strutted towards him.

“And now for you, what do you want? I don’t have any time. We have lunch at twelve sharp and the roast is not yet in the oven. In the afternoon, I have to take care of the garden, which looks really bad, and in the evening, I have a very important meeting at the Women’s Club. It’s about the decorations for the community festival at Thanksgiving. Marcie Bronkowitz actually suggested that everything should be green and white. Green and white! For Thanksgiving! Can you believe it? It’s absolutely vital that I attend the meeting.”

“Of course,” Jupiter hurried to say. “Green and white are completely out of the question. I don’t want to steal your precious time for long either, but I just want to ask you briefly what you can tell me about Irene Hammontree.”

“Oh, are you here because of the house break-in? I should have guessed that. Are you still playing detective with your friends? But who’s been gossiping again, that you know about it now? I only spoke to Maud Espenson, Mrs Hudson, the Kramers, the Meyers, the Jacksons and Marcie Bronkowitz about it.”

“House break-in?” Jupiter enquired cautiously.

“Well, the break-in at Irene’s! Or rather, Irene’s house. Irene is dead, poor thing.”

“Mrs Kretchmer, it would be awfully nice of you to tell me more about that... and about Mrs Hammontree.”

Two forces were wrestling with each other inside Eudora Kretchmer, which was clearly visible on her face. On the one hand, she was desperate to get lunch on the table at twelve o’clock sharp, as she did every Sunday. On the other hand, this was an opportunity to gossip a few secrets about her deceased neighbour that she could not pass up.

The desire to gossip prevailed.

“John, be a good boy and go inside and preheat the oven, will you? I’ll be there in a minute.”

John obeyed and Mrs Kretchmer looked sternly at the First Investigator. “I can only spare five minutes!”

“Of course,” said Jupiter.

They went to the verandah and sat down in the white garden chairs with the pink flowered cushions. Then Eudora Kretchmer began to talk.

At some point, out of the corner of his eye, Jupiter noticed two small figures moving around behind the screen door. Chastity and Charity were obviously eavesdropping on the conversation. But Jupiter did not betray them.

“Well, Irene had been my neighbour for... how long now? Twenty years? Well, quite a while, anyway. She lived over there.” Mrs Kretchmer pointed to a house diagonally across the road that looked similarly posh to her own, although the front garden didn’t look quite so much—in fact it looked rather a bit overgrown. “She was a somewhat simple-minded person, never went to church either and had little contact with her neighbours. The fact that she lived in this area was also only due to the fact that she had married rich—her husband was an entrepreneur. But he’s been dead for ten years now.” She lowered her voice and leaned forward conspiratorially. “Marcie Bronkowitz—who lives up ahead—happened to see her once in Santa Monica... with another man! And hers was still alive then! Yes, yes, still waters run deep... But just look at her garden! I always say you can tell who you’re dealing with by their garden. Doesn’t your aunt still have one?”

It took Jupiter a moment to realize that Mrs Kretchmer had asked him a question. "She has a little herb patch and some vegetables... and flowers on the verandah."

"Yes, yes, Mathilda Jones has always been very... uh... pragmatic... uh... where was I?"

"Irene Hammontree," Jupiter said.

"Yes, right. Irene. She wasn't young anymore and she didn't have anyone around here, so as a good neighbour, I took care of her a bit—that goes without saying. When she fell ill, she made a provision in her will that her property should be donated to our church community. She asked me to take care of everything when the time came. Well, and then it happened faster than we all thought. One morning she just didn't wake up. That's the kind of death you wish for, isn't it?" She sighed and looked pensively down the road. "I went through her house once with some ladies from the Women's Club to sort out the interesting things for the next bazaar, and I called your uncle for the rest."

"Didn't she have any relatives?" Jupiter asked.

"There was a nephew, I think, but she had little contact with him. I saw him for the first time at the funeral. Fortunately, your uncle picked up all the junk right away, because it has to be cleared out before the house can be sold. You see, my husband's sister has had her eye on the house for some time. But if everything works out, the real estate agent will have the contract ready by next week." Mrs Kretchmer beamed at him shamelessly.

"How nice for you," Jupiter said. That at least settled the question of why the house clearance had happened so quickly after Mrs Hammontree's death. "And what about the break-in you were talking about earlier?"

"Oh, yes, the break-in! I went over there again this morning because I wasn't quite sure whether I had switched off the light in the basement yesterday, and sure enough, the front door had been broken open! Nothing was stolen as there was nothing left, but of course I called the police anyway. They didn't do anything. The police called it an 'ordinary break-in'. Someone must have seen the obituary in the newspaper. It only appeared the day before yesterday, because this nephew didn't think it was necessary to place one, but the Women's Club took pity and put an obituary in the paper themselves... uh... where was I? Oh yes, the intruders must have seen the ad and thought that there was still something to get in the house. Nobody could have known that it was already empty. But what is so ordinary about a break-in, I ask myself! What kind of world do we live in! Now the lock has to be changed before my sister-in-law can move in!"

"And you're sure nothing was stolen?"

"Absolutely sure. The house was completely empty."

Jupe cleared his throat. "Among the things my uncle took was a chess set. Do you remember that?"

"The chess set! Oh yes, I remember that. Strange that you should ask about it."

"Why is that strange?"

"Well, there was this nice young man at my door asking about Irene's things."

Jupiter listened up. "Was that, by any chance, a tall, athletic man in his early thirties with dark hair?"

"Oh, you know him? Yes, he was here on Friday night."

"And he asked about the chess set?" Jupiter guessed.

"No, not specifically about the chess set, actually. He just asked in general if Irene had had things that had anything to do with chess. I immediately thought of the chess set, of course, and I told him about your uncle's dump." Suddenly Eudora Kretchmer slapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, dear! Do you think that he could have been the intruder?"

“Possibly,” Jupiter murmured. “On the other hand... why would he still have broken into Mrs Hammontree’s house when he knew it was empty... or that the chess set was no longer there?”

That seemed to reassure Mrs Kretchmer. “You’re right, though. I almost kept the chess set for the bazaar, but in the end—who among the ladies plays chess? And it didn’t look valuable at all. Heaven knows why Irene had hidden it.”

“It was hidden?” Jupiter listened up.

“Yes, didn’t I tell you? In the closet. When we took the items out, we had to clean them properly—and my goodness, Irene didn’t pay too much attention to cleanliness. And in the process, we found an old clothes bag—only there weren’t any clothes in it, but some valuables. Among other things was the chess set. Strange, isn’t it?”

“What were those valuables?” asked Jupiter.

“Oh, well, valuables... that was just a figure of speech. There were some jewellery, but only cheap stuff—we had that checked right away. Then there were a few mementos, shells, stones, bits and pieces of worthless stuff... and what else... oh, yes, there was a diary and old postcards—of course, I threw all that away immediately because it’s private and none of anybody’s business. Well, and then there was the chess set. We looked at it carefully, but it was of no use to us. That’s why I gave it to your uncle.”

At that moment, John Kretchmer came out of the house. He waved the Sunday paper excitedly. “Eudora, dear!”

“Not now, John, did you turn the oven on?”

“Yes, I did. Do you know what I just read?”

“Can’t we talk about it later?” asked Mrs Kretchmer indignantly.

“The chess set you told me about...”

“What about it?”

“Titus Jones auctioned it off... for seven thousand dollars!”

Mrs Kretchmer laughed brightly. “But that’s nonsense, John!”

“But it’s in the paper!” He showed her the headline.

Eudora Kretchmer stopped laughing and looked questioningly back and forth between her husband and Jupiter.

“It’s correct, Mrs Kretchmer,” Jupiter said calmly.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s why I’m here. The Three Investigators want to find out what makes the chess set so valuable.”

But that didn’t seem to interest Mrs Kretchmer at all at that moment. “Seven thousand dollars? But that must be a mistake!”

“It isn’t. I was there.”

Mrs Kretchmer sat up straight and her expression stiffened. “I hope you realize that the money is not yours. I settled Irene Hammontree’s estate at her request. It’s in her will. All proceeds will be donated to the church.”

“With the money my uncle paid you for the things you didn’t want, you can of course do whatever you agreed with Mrs Hammontree,” Jupiter said. “However, what my uncle does with the things after that has nothing to do with you.”

“But I didn’t know anyone would pay that much money for the chess set!”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean by ‘yes’?”

“Yes, you are right. You didn’t know that.”

“So I should get the money!”

“No.”

“But I’m entitled to it!”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken about this.”

“How dare you talk to me like that!” Mrs Kretchmer raised her voice. “You are a very, very naughty boy!”

“Eudora...” Her husband tried to calm her down.

“Stay out of it, John!” she hissed at him. “We’ll see whose money it is!” She stood up jerkily such that the chair legs scraped ugly across the verandah floor. Threateningly, she raised her thin index finger to Jupiter. “Tell your aunt and uncle that there will be repercussions!” With that she rushed back into the house.

John Kretchmer managed an apologetic smile, then he too simply left Jupiter sitting there.

The First Investigator sat there pondering for half a minute or so. He was about to return to his bicycle when he heard a soft voice.

“Psst!”

Jupiter turned around. One of the twins was standing behind the fly screen again. And to his great surprise, the girl beckoned him closer. “Come here! I can tell you a secret!”

Jupiter had to crouch down to hear her next words. Conspiratorially, she murmured to him: “There was another man who asked about the chess set!”

That was all the girl could say because by then, Eudora Kretchmer’s energetic voice was echoing through the house: “Chastity! Charity! Set the table!”

A moment later, the girl was gone.

6. Sam Chiccarelli

When the doctor realized that he was not alone in the room with Bishop Blake, he whirled around and stared at Pete, dumbfounded.

“Help me!” pleaded Mr Blake softly, reaching out to Pete.

The Second Investigator overcame his fright and courageously stepped towards the man. “What are you doing! Leave Mr Blake alone!”

Pete saw that Bishop Blake was groping for the button to call the nursing staff. The man noticed this and slapped Blake’s hand aside.

That was enough. Pete grabbed the man by the shoulder. He reacted as fast as lightning. With unexpected strength, he pushed the Second Investigator away. Pete staggered back and slammed the back of his head against the wall of the room. Stars danced before his eyes. The man stepped past him towards the door. Pete tried to hold him—but only managed to grab the man’s coat. Already the stranger was out the door. At the same moment, Mr Blake pressed the call button.

Pete took a deep breath until the stars disappeared. He then got up and immediately took up the pursuit of the fake doctor. As he stood in the corridor, he just saw the man disappear around the corner. Pete sprinted off. He wouldn’t want that guy to get away from him! Down the corridor, around the corner—and Pete almost collided with a large medical apparatus that a nurse was pushing on a wheeled table in front of her.

“Hey! How dare you!” But Pete simply ran past the nurse, ignoring the indignant shouts. The corridor lay deserted in front of him, with only an old woman shuffling around in a dressing gown while holding onto a rack on wheels from which hung an IV drip.

“Where is he?” he called to her from a distance.

“Th—there...” the old lady stammered and pointed to the door to the staircase, which was just slamming shut.

The Second Investigator ran to the door and pushed it open. The stairwell was well lit. He heard the echo of hurried footsteps. From above or below? It was hard to tell. But if the perpetrator wanted to escape, it was obviously downstairs. Pete jumped down the stairs, took four steps at a time and leapt over the banisters onto the next section of stairs.

He had already gone one and a half floors when he realized his mistake when he heard the squeak of a door above him. Pete cursed, turned around and sprinted up the stairs. The ward where Mr Blake was was on the second highest floor. The door he had heard could not have been on the highest floor as the perpetrator would have reached there much earlier. So he had to have fled to the roof.

Pete ran to the very top. There was only a white, unadorned steel door. He pushed it open and stood on the gravel-covered flat roof of the hospital. There was no one to be seen. But Pete heard something rattling and clattering from the southern edge of the roof. Hastily he ran towards it. There was an old fire escape here! From the edge of the roof, Pete saw the last part of the staircase fold down. The fugitive then jumped to the ground and ran towards the car park. There was no point in chasing him any more. Pete would never catch up. Instead, he squinted his eyes to watch what the man was doing.

He jumped into an old white Chevrolet, but the car was much too far away to make out the licence plate number. Pete watched him go until he had left the car park with squealing tyres and disappeared towards the main road.

The Second Investigator gave himself a moment to catch his breath. His gaze fell on the doctor's coat he still held in his clenched fist. A name was embroidered on it—'Carson Brewer, MD'.

After Pete and Jupe left, Bob spent fifteen minutes on the computer at Headquarters, searching the Internet for 'Sam Chiccarelli'. He tried different spellings for 'Chiccarelli'—and found exactly one matching name in the area—in the mountains north of Malibu, barely half an hour's drive from Rocky Beach. Bob took down the address, memorized the route, left Headquarters and drove his old yellow Beetle onto the coastal road towards Malibu.

Just before the turn-off to the north, he stopped in front of a flower shop, bought a small bouquet and had it wrapped in cellophane. Then he left the city and drove into the mountains on Kanan Dume Road, where the traffic slowed down considerably. The road meandered up the dry hills, past groves of sycamore trees, small vineyards and orange groves. Hardly anyone lived here. But those who could afford a house in the mountains usually also had a narrow private access road leading up to their property.

Sam Chiccarelli was apparently one of them. Bob almost missed the turn-off that led even higher up into the mountains. He followed the increasingly narrow road until it turned into a dusty dirt road. Bob decided to leave the car and walk the last bit. He put on a peaked cap, took the bouquet of flowers, got out and followed the dirt road.

Two minutes later, he was standing in front of a whitewashed house with a reddish-brown tiled roof, half shaded by the trees around it. The house looked new, but modelled itself on the old Spanish-style buildings that were typical of the area. The lush green of a large garden flashed out behind the house. Bob heard the sound of lawn sprinklers and detected the faint smell of chlorine. Apparently there was also a pool somewhere.

He straightened his shoulders, stepped towards the front door and pressed the bell.

There was a rumble from the upper floor. Briefly, a shadow moved behind a window, then Bob heard footsteps on a staircase. While Bob waited, he noticed distinct scratches around the door lock. When Bob examined the damage, he saw that it had been broken. Suddenly the door swung open and a tall, blond man in his early thirties stood before him. Bob noticed a small scar above his upper lip. Over his rimless glasses, he looked at Bob questioningly.

"Yes?"

"Good afternoon, sir, are you Mr Sam Chiccarelli?"

"That's me."

Bob held out the bouquet of flowers to him. "Someone thought of you and Flower Power Malibu sends you this little floral greeting. Flower Power Malibu brings joy to your day."

"Really? Lovely. Thank you." Mr Chiccarelli accepted the bouquet, gave Bob a friendly nod and was about to close the door.

"Was there a break-in?" asked Bob hastily.

"Excuse me?"

Bob pointed to the marks around the door lock. "Someone broke the door... and that wasn't very long ago, otherwise you would have replaced the lock already."

Now Mr Chiccarelli raised his eyebrows in amazement. "That's a very clever observation."

"I didn't think you have to be afraid of burglars out here. Has anything been stolen?"

"I really don't see how that's any of your business, boy."

"Nothing at all, of course," Bob said. "It's just an occupational disease."

"As a flower messenger?"

Bob couldn't gauge whether Chiccarelli was amused or annoyed. But he had to make a move before the man slammed the door in his face. "I'm not only a flower messenger, I'm also an investigator—together with my friends."

"An investigator, really? That sounds interesting... and you also handle break-ins?"

"We do that sometimes—burglaries and other things. Often we are hired to find lost things."

"I understand. Lost keys and wallets are not exactly Sherlock Holmes-like, but why not. I'm sure the owners are happy."

Bob nodded. "But sometimes the things we look for could be more interesting—like trinkets or hidden messages or something. Right now, for example, we're looking for a chess set." Bob watched Mr Chiccarelli closely, but he could not read any particular reaction on his face.

"Why? Did someone misplace a chess set?"

"It wasn't misplaced, it was stolen... and a man ended up in hospital badly injured because of it. His name is Bishop Blake. Does that name mean anything to you?" Bob realized a moment too late that with what he just said—he had revealed that he was not here for the flowers.

Sam Chiccarelli looked at him blankly. Then he smiled. "Why should that name mean anything to me?"

"Oh, no reason, I'm asking just in case you happen to know."

"No, that doesn't mean anything to me. But you know what? I think you're a smart guy. Maybe I should hire you. The door has indeed been broken into and you're absolutely right, I haven't got round to having the lock fixed yet because it only happened last night. Why don't you come in and have a look around my place? Maybe your trained eye will spot some traces I've overlooked."

Bob's internal alarm jumped from green to yellow. He was alone. He could not assess this man. No one knew where he was. On the other hand, he was here to find out more about Sam Chiccarelli, and what better way to do that than to enter his house?

"Well, actually we are investigating as a team and I have to admit that I am not the most skilled among us in looking for clues. I don't have much time at all. The flowers, you know —"

Sam Chiccarelli took a step back, made an inviting hand gesture and smiled at him.

"But I can take a quick look," Bob said and stepped inside.

"Just take a look around at your leisure," Chiccarelli suggested after he had led him into the huge living room from which one could see through a large glass front onto a patio. Behind it, in a flowering garden, lay the small pool that Bob had already smelled. The view of the surrounding mountains was impressive.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"A glass of water, perhaps."

"Coming right up." Mr Chiccarelli went through a wide sliding door into the adjoining kitchen.

Bob looked around. The furniture was modern, with lots of wood and white surfaces. There was an open fireplace and no television.

"What's the deal with this stolen chess set?" Mr Chiccarelli asked from the kitchen.

“We don’t really know yet,” Bob answered evasively. He looked around for an escape route in case something went wrong. But the way out led past the kitchen door and the patio door was closed.

“Could I maybe take a look at the patio? I think... uh, I might have discovered something there.”

“Go ahead!”

Bob approached the glass door, pulled it open and stepped outside. The patio reasonably large and was surrounded by a metre-high metal balustrade with an opening for a staircase leading down to the garden. The garden was surrounded by a wooden fence. Bob walked to the left of the patio and saw that the space between the end of the patio and the fence was about a metre. As the patio was elevated, he could see over the fence and there was a slope going down about two metres to dense bushes. There was no suitable escape route.

“So, what did you find out here?”

Bob winced, for he had not heard Mr Chiccarelli approach behind him at all. Quickly, he bent down to a few crumbs of potting soil on the patio. “Oh, I was wrong. I thought it was a footprint. It could have been that the intruder tried to enter through the patio door first. Like I said, I’m not too good at finding clues.”

Chiccarelli smilingly handed a glass of water to Bob and they returned into the house.

“Well, maybe you can bring your two friends sometime. Together you might find out more.”

The yellow alarm jumped to red. Bob had not said anything about ‘two friends’.

“Yes, I’ll do that. But now I really have to go.”

“You haven’t had your drink yet,” Chiccarelli noted, pointing to the glass in Bob’s hand.

Bob looked at it. Was it his imagination or was the water in it a little cloudy? ... As if something had been dissolved in it...

“Yeah—uh—thanks, but if I don’t get going now, I’ll get in trouble with my boss.”

“At Flower Dealer Malibu?”

“Exactly.”

“Or was it Flower Power Malibu?”

Sam Chiccarelli closed the patio door and his smile faded.

7. Video Analysis

For a second, Sam Chiccarelli and Bob stared at each other wordlessly.

Suddenly, a small, wiry woman ran from the hallway into the living room. She was middle-aged, had short grey hair, wore a tracksuit—and stormed towards them in a rage. Bob was so surprised that he jumped aside only at the last moment. However, Chiccarelli was not fast enough. The woman spun on her left foot and plunged her right into Chiccarelli's stomach with a battle cry. The man went down gasping. The attacker lunged at him again. Chiccarelli yanked one leg up. The woman deftly avoided it but she crashed into an upholstered chair.

It all happened so fast that Bob hardly knew what was happening. Then he realized that the woman was attacking mainly Chiccarelli, not him—and that he should get out while he could.

Bob turned around and reached for the handle of the patio door.

“You stay right here, boy!” the woman gasped as she twisted one arm behind Chiccarelli's back until he cried out in pain.

Bob didn't think too much about it. He pulled the door open and rushed into the patio. Escaping into the garden was no use to him, because it was fenced in. Bob glanced over the metal balustrade on the left. He ran towards it, hurled himself over both the balustrade and the fence, dropped onto the slope and rolled down. Branches and thorns pricked through his T-shirt and tore open his skin. For a moment, it looked as if Bob would be stuck in the bushes, but then he managed to roll to the bottom.

Without paying attention to his scratches, he picked himself up, ran to the other side of the house and back to the dirt road. The last thing he heard from the house was the scream of the attacker. Apparently Sam Chiccarelli had managed to free himself from her grip.

Even as he ran back to the road, Bob pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and dialled the emergency number. “This is Bob Andrews!” he called out, panting. “There's been a break-in north of Malibu! Two people are about to kill each other!” He gave the exact address, then hung up. He wasn't even sure what had happened, but it didn't matter as long as someone did something—hopefully someone who could handle taekwondo kicks and karate chops better than Bob.

Finally he reached his yellow Beetle. Bob jumped into the car, started the engine, turned around and accelerated.

“You won't believe what just happened!” gasped Pete as he stormed into Headquarters. Jupiter was only not startled because he had already heard Pete. “I've just come from the hospital and that's where the doctor almost strangled Bishop Blake, but of course it wasn't a doctor at all. It wasn't the sports teacher either. I got in trouble after he took off, but at least I could see what kind of vehicle he was driving—a white Chevrolet... Where is Bob anyway?”

“I don't know where Bob is,” Jupiter answered emphatically slowly and clearly. “I've just come back from Mrs Kretchmer's myself. My suggestion is to sit down, have a biscuit, collect your thoughts and try to summarize your eventful morning again.”

Pete rolled his eyes, but he collected himself anyway. Although he couldn't find any biscuits left, he was soon able to tell Jupiter in a somewhat factual manner about what had happened at the hospital.

"And when I returned to Mr Blake's ward, there was already a huge crowd! Three nurses and five orderlies and the granny with the IV drip who claimed I'd nearly knocked her over... and a doctor who turned out to be Dr Brewer who had had his coat stolen.

"They all thought I was the bad guy, of course. And they didn't want to go with me to see Mr Blake, because of the shock and excitement and all that, when he could have cleared things up straight away. Man, it really took them a while to understand. But then Maria Esposito came and said that five minutes after me, someone else had asked for Mr Blake, and the description exactly matched the fake doctor. Still, they wouldn't let me see Mr Blake. An orderly then went and got my wallet from his room." Pete rolled his eyes and slumped back in his chair. "That was some day!"

Pete had barely finished his report when Bob barged into the trailer. Under his torn and dirty T-shirt, he was completely sweaty.

"What a day this was!" he announced, rushed to the fridge, tore it open, took out a can of Coke and put it to his neck. Then he opened the can and drank and drank and drank, put it down, burped so hard that the walls shook, and dropped into the last free armchair.

"So... what happened to you?" Pete asked.

"Ninja attack. Oh, you mean the T-shirt? That was just some undergrowth." And now it was Bob's turn to tell.

Pete could hardly believe his ears. "I don't believe it! That was the same guy at the hospital!"

Bob frowned and the Second Investigator told his story for a second time.

"He probably realized that we are together when I told him about our detective agency," Bob reflected aloud. "But I was still completely clueless then. He did seem strange to me, but I thought I was imagining it. By the time I realized I was in trouble, it was too late. If it hadn't been for that ninja woman..."

"What was she doing there anyway?" asked Pete. "And who was that?"

"If I only knew..."

"It is also puzzling that Bishop Blake only gave Sam Chiccarelli's name after he had been hit, but claimed to Pete that he had never heard the name before," Jupiter remarked.

"At least we know Sam Chiccarelli is not the sports teacher," Bob said.

"But they could be working together," Pete said. "Chiccarelli hired the sports teacher to hit on Mr Blake! Or the other way around."

"No, not the other way round," Jupiter contradicted. "Because the crime vehicle was not the white Chevrolet you saw, but a dark Pontiac. I know that from Derek."

"Or it was the ninja woman," Bob said.

"Also possible," the First Investigator admitted. "We are definitely still missing a few pieces of the puzzle to put it all together. Fortunately, we still have open leads that we can follow up."

Now the First Investigator told the others about his visit to Mrs Kretchmer.

"Well," Pete muttered. "And what are the leads now?"

Bob nodded. "Basically, you just found out that Mrs Hammontree also found the chess set valuable somehow, otherwise she wouldn't have hidden it."

"Actually... I found out a lot more than that," Jupiter contradicted.

"Oh yeah?" Bob wondered.

“Yes. Firstly, we know that Irene Hammontree’s house was broken into last night. That may have been a coincidence, but I don’t believe in coincidences. Secondly, Mrs Kretchmer is in possession of some of Irene Hammontree’s personal documents that may be of interest to us.”

Bob and Pete looked questioningly at the First Investigator. “What documents?” Bob wanted to know. “You didn’t say anything about that.”

“Eudora Kretchmer told me that she had found the chess set in a clothes bag in the closet together with a diary and postcards, which she supposedly threw away immediately because they were none of anybody’s business.” Jupiter lowered his eyebrows. “Anyone who really believes that Eudora Kretchmer would throw away her neighbour’s diary, raise your hand now.”

All hands stayed down.

“And that’s why it’s worth paying another visit to our favourite Women’s Club committee member. If possible, when she herself is not there—like this evening, for example. That’s when she’ll be discussing Marcie Bronkowitz’s outrageous decoration proposals for Thanksgiving.”

“Are you going to break into her house and steal the diary?” asked Pete, startled.

“That won’t be necessary. Prudence and Purity will help us.”

“Their names are Chastity and Charity,” Bob said.

“Whatever...”

“And why would the Kretchmer twins help you?” Pete asked.

“Because they have a secret... and then there’s this.” Jupiter pulled out Derek’s USB drive. “We should take a look at what Derek filmed yesterday at the salvage yard.”

The First Investigator started the computer, inserted the USB drive and copied the video clip into their computer. Then he played the video clip, and the three of them looked intently at the screen.

The recording began when the duel for the chess set had just reached a thousand dollars. Bishop Blake and the sports teacher bid each other higher and higher while the spectators became more and more excited. Every now and then, Derek would comment on the action with surprising utterances like ‘No way!’ or ‘My word!’. But of course The Three Investigators knew how the story ended and so they tried to pay attention to details that they might have missed the day before.

Bishop Blake won the auction and went to the front while the sports teacher left the salvage yard. After that Derek had filmed the atmosphere in the salvage yard for a while, the excited whispering crowd and the rush to the refreshment stand. Then he panned his mobile phone over the fence to the part of Rocky Beach that could be seen from here. In the far distance, the ocean glistened between the houses, and they could hear the rustling on the street and the broken exhaust of a passing car.

Mr Blake appeared again briefly at the edge of the frame, leaning on his walking stick, the box with the chess set under his arm, on his way out into the street, but Derek either hadn’t noticed or hadn’t thought it was worth filming. A little later, they heard the screeching brakes and the bang, accompanied by a few wobbles that were due to Derek’s fright. An engine howled and was already moving away when Derek finally pointed the camera at the street.

There was the black Pontiac, racing down the street and disappearing around the next bend. The licence plate was indeed not visible. Then Pete and Jupiter came into view. They immediately ran to the motionless Mr Blake and the video recording ended.

“So, what did you see?” Jupe turned to his friends.

“Well, nothing new really,” Pete confessed.

“So you didn’t notice anything that could help us?”

Pete shook his head and had the vague feeling that something should have caught his eye.

“Bob?”

He, too, shrugged uneasily. “So what did you see?”

Jupiter sighed. “Indeed. Our suspected perpetrator is a sports teacher—squash or tennis instructor, to be precise—and he’s unmarried and childless, which is not entirely unimportant for our investigation.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other. It was one of those moments when they didn’t know whether Jupiter was joking or serious.

“Ha ha!” Pete said after a brief silence.

The First Investigator rolled his eyes, jumped back a little and let the video clip run in slow motion. They watched as Uncle Titus brought the hammer crashing down, the crowd erupted in cheers and the sports teacher stood up angrily, the chair tipped over, the man picked up his sports bag, turned and headed for the exit. Derek had been kind enough to zoom in on him for a few seconds to capture the anger on his face, which was clearly visible despite the sunglasses. Jupiter paused the video.

“Okay, the bag in his hand is a tennis bag,” Pete noted.

“Or a squash bag,” Jupiter specified.

“So what? I have one at home too,” Pete commented, “and yet I’m not a tennis teacher.”

“And what else?”

“Nothing else,” Pete said.

“You’re not looking closely,” Jupiter reprimanded him. “Under the sports jacket he’s wearing a white T-shirt with the logo of Phoenix Sports—the sports centre chain—printed on it.”

“Since when do you know about sports centres? Have you ever been to one?” Pete rebuffed.

“No,” Jupiter admitted candidly. “But I also know the Paramount Pictures logo, although I’ve never been to their movie studio.”

“All right, perhaps he goes to the Phoenix Sports Centre to train,” Pete countered. “You can see that the man does sport, but that doesn’t make him a sports teacher.”

“How many people do you know who actually go to sports in a T-shirt from their sports centre?” asked Jupiter. “In most cases, these T-shirts are only worn by the people who work there because it is their work clothing.”

“But—” Pete began.

“And now watch him move!” Jupiter let the video continue.

“He’s limping ever so slightly,” Bob noted.

“Exactly,” Jupiter agreed with him. “It looks like he hurt himself recently—something in his knees. Would an injured athlete go for training? To play tennis if the knee is not okay? No. But he has his tennis bag with him, so I deduce that he trains others. And before you question the next obvious statement—he doesn’t wear a wedding ring, so he’s unmarried, and the reason he doesn’t have children is that otherwise he probably wouldn’t go to work on Saturday afternoons, but would instead choose the morning shifts during the week, like most people with a family life. This has not been proven, of course, but it is likely enough to allow further speculation on this basis. You may ask why is his assumed childlessness relevant to us at all... because it allows us to speculate that he also works on Sunday today.”

Jupiter left his friends speechless while he went on the Internet and searched for the Phoenix Sports website. A few clicks, then he picked up the phone and switched on the

loudspeaker.

“Who are you calling now?” Pete asked.

“Phoenix Sports Venice, Susie Miller here, how can I help you?” came from the loudspeaker.

“Good afternoon, this is Mark Hopper,” Jupiter said in a slightly disguised voice. “I’m calling to cancel a tennis lesson, I’m afraid I’ve fallen ill.”

“Who do you train with?”

“Well, I’m a bit embarrassed now... I only started last week and I forgot my coach’s name.”

“That’s bad, of course,” Susie Miller said, amused, “but we’ll figure it out.”

“At least I remember what he looks like—quite tall, dark hair and, oh yes, he must have had a knee injury recently, at least that’s what he told me.”

“Oh, then you must mean Bradley. Wait, let me check the schedule and we can reschedule your session. When was that supposed to be?”

“This afternoon at five.”

“Hmm... strange... are you sure? Bradley doesn’t start his shift until six.”

“Oh yes, six o’clock, I mean.”

“But that’s still weird... because at six, there’s a Lucy in Bradley’s schedule here. You’re not Lucy, are you?”

“No, I’m not Lucy. I must have made a mistake.” Jupiter mumbled an apology, hung up and turned to Bob and Pete. “Well, too bad, I was hoping she’d tell me his last name. So I guess we’ll have to go to the Phoenix Sports Centre car park in Venice at half past five today and wait for Bradley. Perhaps we can also check his car for accident marks.”

Bob was the first to regain his speech. “Jupe! That was... really impressive!”

“I know,” Jupe replied without any trace of humility.

“But how did you know to call Venice?” Pete wanted to know. “Phoenix Sports has at least forty centres in the Los Angeles area!”

“On Bradley’s T-shirt, if you look closely, you can still make out two letters under the chain’s logo that specifies the location of the branch he belongs to—‘VE’. This could mean Venice, Ventura and Vernon. The website told me that there was no branch in Vernon. So I had a fifty-fifty chance. The rest was luck.”

“Did you hear that, Pete? Luck was there too—but only a little bit.”

The phone rang.

“I hope that’s not Susie Miller from the sports centre again,” Pete said.

But Jupe shook his head. “They don’t have our number—it’s private and unlisted, remember?” He answered the call: “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

There was no reply, but they heard someone breathing.

“Hello, who is this?” Jupiter asked.

Someone spoke in a muffled voice: “Stop looking for the chess set! And stay away from Bishop Blake!”

“Who are you?”

“Someone who means business! Next time, someone will fall off the roof or won’t be able to escape across the patio.”

Before Jupiter could answer, the man on the other end had hung up.

8. The Sports Teacher

The Venice branch of Phoenix Sports Centre was located in a commercial area directly behind the harbour. Car dealerships, car washes, fast-food chains and huge supermarkets vied for attention with colourful banners and neon signs.

The centre itself was a large concrete block that even housed a swimming pool. The top floor was completely glazed and one could see a few shadowy figures on treadmills and cross trainers from the street. The car park of the sports centre was three quarters empty. Pete parked his MG in such a way that they could see both the entrance to the car park and the entrance to the sports centre. It was exactly half past five.

"I think we're taking quite a risk right now," Pete muttered as he watched the driveway. He grabbed a baseball cap that was lying in the footwell of his car, put it on and pulled it deep into his face.

"We're in a car park," Jupiter remarked. "I consider this to be one of the less risky undertakings that investigation work has to offer."

"Man, you know exactly what I mean, Juve. That threatening call earlier... it was serious! How did he get our number anyway?" But then it occurred to Pete himself: "Our business card! I left it on Mr Blake's bedside table. Sam Chiccarelli must have taken it."

"There's a car coming into the car park!" hissed Bob. An old red Cadillac had rolled in and roared past them. Apparently the exhaust was broken. The driver quickly parked his car and got out. He was tall and strong and wore mirrored sunglasses—no doubt he was the sports teacher from the auction. He grabbed his tennis bag from the back seat—and it was clear that it was the same tennis bag from the video clip. Then he slammed the back door and headed for the main entrance, which took him right past Pete's MG.

"Duck down!" hissed Pete, sinking into the driver's seat.

"My goodness, Pete, could you be any more conspicuous?" complained Jupiter. "Now he's noticed us."

"You're not serious, are you?" whispered Pete.

"Yes, I am," Juve whispered. "Pete, don't look ahead!"

But it was already too late. Bradley glanced into their car, frowned—but kept walking.

Only when the front door slammed shut did The Three Investigators breathe a sigh of relief.

"He noticed us," Bob said. "Pete, you're acting like we've never shadowed anyone before."

"Sorry," Pete said meekly.

"You may make amends," Jupiter suggested.

"How?"

"By looking at Bradley's car, which, by the way, is not a dark Pontiac. I want to put that on record."

"Bradley could still have hit Mr Blake, though," Bob remarked. "I hear there are people who own two cars... or borrow one."

"But he didn't."

"And how do you know that?" asked Pete.

“You can think about it while you examine Bradley’s car.”

“Why me again?”

“You can run the fastest when something goes wrong.”

“Very funny.”

But Pete resigned himself to his fate and got out with a sigh. As inconspicuously as possible, he strolled towards the red Cadillac, looked around once and then glanced through the side window. The inside of the car was untidy. In the footwell were empty bottles, coffee mugs and tangles of greasy paper in which hamburgers had been wrapped. Dangling from the rearview mirror was a small chess piece, a white queen to be exact.

As Pete approached the back seat, a bird chirped nearby. Strange, Pete thought, it sounded like a Red-bellied Flycatcher—the bird whose call The Three Investigators sometimes used as a secret signal. Pete had not even known that it existed in this area.

When Pete noticed the reflection of a hulking figure in the side window, he finally understood... but by then, it was too late.

A hand as heavy as iron came down on his shoulder and yanked him around. Pete slid along the car and before he knew it, he was lying with his back on the boot lid, pressed down by his attacker’s left forearm. Blinking, Pete tried to make out his face in the backlight. But he saw mostly his own fear-filled face reflected in the sunglasses.

“What are you trying to do here, huh?” Bradley growled. “Steal the car radio... or siphon off petrol? Answer me, boy, or I’ll break some of your bones!”

Pete weighed his chances. Maybe he could break free and run away. After all, Bradley had an injured knee.

“Answer me!” Bradley yelled.

“Nothing... none of that,” Pete gasped. “I just wanted to... take a look at your car.”

“Don’t give me that nonsense!” Bradley clenched his right hand into a fist. Pete closed his eyes and already saw himself in his inner eye with a broken nose.

“Let him go!” the First Investigator’s voice echoed across the car park.

Bradley’s grip loosened a little. He had turned around to see Jupiter and Bob hurrying towards them. “Don’t mess with me boys, I can handle you three easily!”

“Without a doubt,” Jupiter replied. “But then we would report you for assault and I don’t know if you would like that, Bradley.”

“Huh? What? How do you even know my name?”

“Let go of Pete and I’ll explain!”

Bradley hesitated for a moment, then took his arm away. The Second Investigator slid down from the boot, quickly stumbled out of Bradley’s reach and back to his friends.

“Wait a minute... I know you!” Bradley exclaimed, looking at Bob. “You’re the boy who was at the salvage yard auction yesterday.”

“Bob Andrews,” Bob said, nodding.

“And we were also at the auction,” Jupiter took the floor again. “I’m Jupiter Jones, the nephew of the salvage yard owner. You tried to bid on a chess set yesterday, but were outbid by a man called Bishop Blake. We noticed that you left the premises rather quickly. When Mr Blake left and stepped onto the street a few minutes later, he was hit by a car and was taken to hospital with serious injuries. We investigated this case and for a while suspected you were the culprit... but we were wrong.”

“Uh, Juve...” Bob murmured to the First Investigator. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because this Cadillac has a broken exhaust,” Jupiter replied. “On Derek’s video recording you can hear exactly how this car is started and goes away—and that’s before

Bishop Blake even leaves the premises. Then when the accident happened, this Cadillac cannot be heard at all.”

“Oh...” Bob muttered.

“Wait a minute!” said Bradley irritably, taking off his sunglasses for the first time. “Hospital? Investigated? I don’t understand.”

“We are investigators.” Jupiter handed him their business card. “And we just wanted to take a closer look at your car to find out more about you and your motives for wanting to pay almost seven thousand dollars for an old chess set. But now that we know you weren’t the culprit, we might as well ask you directly—why were you willing to spend so much money on that chess set?”

Bradley still seemed unsure what to make of the three boys. “You’re not wanting anything from my car?”

“Your car is completely irrelevant in the light of our investigation,” Jupiter replied impatiently.

Bradley sighed. “All right, I’ll take your word for it—even if I don’t understand what your investigation is about.”

“There’s nothing much to understand,” Bob explained. “We’d like to find out what the chess set is all about.”

Bradley thought for a moment, then shrugged. “I still don’t get it, but then I might as well tell you.” He glanced at his watch. “I’ve got fifteen minutes before my shift starts.”

“That will do,” Jupiter said.

Bradley pointed to the sports centre. “Let’s go in.”

9. The Missing Grandmaster

Shortly afterwards, The Three Investigators sat with Bradley over a Coke at a round plastic table in a soulless sports centre café full of screens flickering with sports broadcasts.

"I'll tell you what it's about," Bradley said. "I'm a chess fan. It's my other interest besides my work here at the centre. Nobody gives me credit for it, but I need something for my head. Also, I'm a collector. I collect souvenirs related to world-class chess—autographs from grandmasters, T-shirts from legendary tournaments, stuff like that. It's nothing earth-shattering, just for fun, and sometimes, when I'm short of cash, I sell some of the items to other collectors. My most valuable piece is an original Garri Kasparov notation from a game in the 1985 World Championship."

Pete frowned.

"This is a piece of paper on which the players write down the moves to keep track of them," Jupiter explained.

Bradley nodded. "Last week I spotted this obituary in *Rocky Beach Today*. It was a coincidence that I saw it at all. My cousin lives in Rocky Beach. I was visiting her and there was the paper lying around on the kitchen table."

"Irene Hammontree's obituary," Jupiter guessed.

"Irene Hammontree—whose maiden name is Lansky."

The Three Investigators gave each other irritated looks.

"Ha!" shouted Bradley triumphantly, banging the table so hard the glasses clinked. "I knew you had no idea about that! Otherwise you wouldn't have just auctioned off the chess set just like that. What luck that the old man and I were there at all! Otherwise it might have been sold to someone for twenty dollars and never appear again. Of course, I was annoyed that it went up so high to seven thousand dollars. I had already gone higher than I wanted to anyway. But then I thought to myself—at least now the set is in good hands. The old man knew exactly what he was bidding for."

"Uh..." Pete tentatively raised his right index finger. "Am I the only one who still doesn't understand what this is all about?"

Bob shook his head.

Bradley narrowed his eyes and looked at The Three Investigators in turn, scrutinising them. "You really have no idea?"

"I have a hunch," Jupiter confessed. "Does Irene Lansky happen to have anything to do with Gregor Lansky, the former world-class chess player?"

"Bingo," Bradley said. "She was his sister."

"Gregor Lansky was a star on the international chess scene in the seventies," Jupiter said as he himself was an avid chess fan. "I remember that he was known for almost always starting a game with the fairly uncommon Queen's Knight Opening—where the knight is moved from 'b1' to 'c3'. Gregor Lansky was already considered a future world champion back then, until one day he disappeared without a trace."

Bradley nodded. "You do know a little something!"

"Jupiter knows something," Pete declared magnanimously. "We don't."

“Lansky was a genius,” Bradley said. “He became a grandmaster at the age of fifteen. But he was a bit weird, like many famous chess players. For example, he carried a chess set around with him. He practised with it all the time, replaying famous games and analysing them. It was always the same chess set and in interviews he always said that it brought him luck and that he would be lost without it. You see the same chess set quite often in press photos. But then Lansky disappeared and with him the set.”

“What do you mean he disappeared?” Bob asked.

“He disappeared. He just disappeared. It was a big scandal back then and for years there were the wildest rumours.”

Jupe nodded. “I read about that once. Some believed that Lansky voluntarily withdrew from everything because he feared for his mental health. Many world-class chess players have psychological problems because the intensive occupation with the game is so demanding that... well... they just blow a few fuses—especially when success comes at such a young age. Others had wild conspiracy theories and believed that the Soviet KGB had made Lansky disappear because he threatened to beat the reigning Russian world champion.”

“There are other stories that have to do with intelligence agencies, but I don’t believe them all,” Bradley said. “That’s the way it was back then—Russians and Americans were always competing—whether in sports, space or chess, conspiracy theories weren’t far away.

“In any case, Lansky disappeared, and he’s still not seen today. Every few years, some nut claims to have seen him, but every time it’s not true. If he were still alive, he would be an old man today. However, only people who know a little about Lansky’s sister Irene, know about her. Even fewer know that she was called Irene Hammontree. So when I read the obituary, I went straight to her house because I wanted to know what was happening with her estate. I thought there might be some interesting things from her brother. But a strange neighbour told me that the house was already empty and that all the stuff had ended up at a dump owned by a Titus Jones. So I went there and got there just in time for the auction.”

“The good Mrs Kretchmer...” Jupiter murmured.

“I thought I was crazy when there was actually Lansky’s famous chess set lying around on the table. I wanted to buy it immediately because I was afraid that someone else would recognize it.”

“... Which was what Bishop Blake did then,” Bob remarked.

“Have I understood this correctly now?” asked Pete. “The chess set itself is not valuable at all? It’s not made of painted-over jade or has a secret hiding place full of diamonds, but it’s just an ordinary chess set that merely belonged to a famous person?”

Bradley nodded. “At least, that’s what it means to me.”

Pete was disappointed, but then something occurred to him: “There must be something else behind it. Mr Blake said his life depended on the chess set.”

“This is very similar to what Lansky claimed to the press at the time,” Jupiter noted.

“That he was lost without the set. Can you make sense of that, Bradley?”

Bradley shook his head. “Lansky was probably just spinning around, and what that old man meant by that... I don’t know. Maybe he was just a fan and really wanted the set. But he can relax now, he outbid me after all.”

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “But the chess set was stolen.”

“Stolen?”

“The set was gone when we reached the street and saw Mr Blake lying on the ground. The thief is probably the same person who hit him.”

“That’s intense!” Bradley remarked.

“Yes. But we will find the culprit and the chess set.”

“And how so?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter admitted.

“But we are great at finding things,” Bob explained.

“We are investigators after all,” Pete said, not without pride.

“Well then, good luck! It would be a real shame if this chess set were to be lost.”

A young woman in a white and red Phoenix Sports T-shirt approached Bradley. “Brad, you have a training session, your student is waiting for you!”

“Oh, well,” Bradley grumbled with a glance at his watch and rose. “I’ve got work to do, boys, so I’ll keep my fingers crossed that you find the chess set. If you need my help—anytime!”

“Thank you very much,” Jupiter said. “And have fun with Lucy.”

Bradley looked at him surprised. “How do you know?”

“We are investigators after all,” Jupiter replied and grinned.

10. Help from the Twins

“Straight ahead at the intersection,” Jupiter asked when they finally reached Rocky Beach after a long traffic jam at a construction site.

“Aren’t we going back to the salvage yard?” wondered Pete.

“No, we’re going to the Kretchmers’.”

“Because of the diary?” Bob guessed. “You still haven’t told us why Prudence and Purity would help us get our hands on it.”

“You’ll know soon.”

When they reached the Kretchmers’ house, the car was not in the driveway.

“The lady of the house is not here,” Jupiter noted with satisfaction. “She’s probably discussing the colour design guidelines for the community festival at Thanksgiving. Marcie Bronkowitz has suggested green and white. Of course, that calls for a full meeting.”

Bob parked his car outside, a little further along the road side, and the three of them walked to the house.

“And there are the two little ones, Chastity and Charity,” Pete remarked, pointing to the lawn—trimmed as if with a beard trimmer—where the twins had built a doll’s house and were playing. “When the cat’s out of the house, the mice dance on the table... or rather, on the lawn. I bet my new shoes that they’re not normally allowed to play out here. Just imagine if a blade of grass bends!”

“I can’t imagine that,” Bob said with a grin, “if Mummy could see this!” Suddenly, his grin faded. “Uh-oh! Daddy seems to be home, though.” He pointed to an open window. “I hear the television.”

Jupe looked at his watch. “That’s the Dodgers game against the Giants.”

Pete opened his eyes in shock. “That’s on now? Darn!”

Bob waved it off. “The Dodgers are going to win anyway.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Pete remarked.

“Fellas, the only thing important about this game is that we don’t have to worry about John Kretchmer. He won’t want to miss a minute of it. He won’t even get up during the commercial breaks to check on his daughters.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Pete.

“His wife is gone for at least two hours. He can put his feet up on the coffee table, drink canned beer and gobble up chips without getting into trouble. That’s his moment of the day. He won’t move from the TV.”

“And how do you know that for sure?” Pete wondered.

“One look in his eyes, Pete, and you’d know too.”

They walked towards the two girls. When Charity noticed the three of them, she nudged her sister and murmured anxiously: “There’s that boy from the dump again!”

“Hello!” The Three Investigators greeted the twins in a friendly manner.

“We mustn’t talk to anyone,” Charity said firmly. “When you talk to strangers, it can end badly.”

“But you have already talked to me today,” Jupiter reminded them.

“That was Chastity, not me,” Charity defended herself, pointing at her sister.

“You told me a secret,” Jupiter turned to the other twin, “that it wasn’t one man who asked for the chess set, but two.”

Chastity looked at him uncertainly, then at her sister. Her courage seemed to have deserted her.

“Your mother doesn’t know about the second man, right?” Jupiter guessed. “Last Friday you were talking to a stranger and then something bad happened. The stranger asked about the chess set and Mrs Hammontree’s house, and the next day your mother discovered that it had been broken into.”

The girls fearfully took a step back. “That’s not true,” Charity said, but it was immediately clear to all three that she was not telling the truth.

“Yes, it’s true. And you didn’t tell your mother afterwards either, right? Because she forbade you to talk to strangers at the door... and rightly so. And now you have a problem because I know, and I could tell your mother.” He put on a diabolical grin.

The girls began to whimper.

“Jupe!” Pete murmured.

“Yes?” Jupiter murmured back.

“It doesn’t work like that!”

“What?”

“You’re scaring them.”

“That was the plan.”

“Not a good plan.” Pete stepped forward, squatted down and said in a soft voice: “What the boy from the dump is trying to say is that we are investigators... and we’re chasing this intruder right now—just like on TV, you know. And you can help us catch him.”

The two thought for a moment, then Chastity said: “But if you catch him, he’ll tell Mummy we weren’t good!”

“No, definitely not.”

“Yes, he will,” she insisted.

“No, really...”

“Yes, he will.”

Jupiter leaned down to Pete and murmured: “That’s working out well.” Then he said to the twins: “If we don’t catch him, he might break into your house and take you with him.”

The girls shrieked.

“Unless you help us,” the First Investigator continued. “Your mother has hidden Mrs Hammontree’s diary and some postcards somewhere. There are very important things in there that can help us catch the intruder. If you get them for us, then...”

“I know where!” Charity shouted and the twins dashed off and disappeared into the house.

“They seem to be well versed in their mother’s private affairs,” Bob remarked.

It wasn’t a minute before the two of them were back. Chastity had a small bundle in her hand, held together with red ribbon.

“We can’t give you these things,” she said firmly. “Mummy will notice it straight away and then we’ll get a scolding. You’re only allowed to look inside.” She lowered her voice. “And only for a moment, so that Daddy doesn’t notice!”

“Don’t worry, it will only take five minutes,” Bob claimed.

“But Bob...” Pete said, but then he saw what Bob was up to. He was holding his mobile phone in his hand. Charity handed him the bundle and Bob immediately got to work, photographing every page of the diary.

“Good idea, Bob,” Jupiter said. Meanwhile, he took the postcards, but only skimmed them. “They’re just holiday greetings, nothing important.”

“Can you catch the intruder by tonight?” Charity asked anxiously.

Now Jupiter began to feel a little sorry for the girls. “We’ll try. You don’t have to be afraid.”

“We can get a club from the garage and stand guard!” Chastity suggested to her sister.

“You really think so?” Charity wondered.

“Sure, the man was old after all, if we hit him on the head—”

“Wait a minute,” Jupiter said irritably. “The man who asked about Mrs Hammontree’s house was old?” What might ‘old’ mean in the eyes of a nine-year-old? To them, The Three Investigators were probably old too.

“Yes,” Chastity said.

“But he was tall and blond and strong and had a little scar above his mouth, right?” asked Pete.

The twins shook their heads at the same time.

“No, he was short and at least a hundred years old, and he had a walking stick,” Chastity said. “I don’t know the colour of his hair... he wore a hat.”

“And Harry Potter glasses!” Charity added.

“Oh!” Jupiter remarked.

“That doesn’t sound like our fake doctor,” Pete noted.

“No,” Bob said irritably. “It sounds like someone else entirely.”

11. Mrs Hammontree's Diary

"So Bishop Blake was here," Pete said as The Three Investigators sat back in the car and drove towards the salvage yard.

"Yes," growled Jupiter discontentedly. "And I'm annoyed that we immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was Sam Chiccarelli. That was stupid."

"So could it be that Mr Blake broke into Mrs Hammontree's house?" asked Bob. "Bradley didn't do it, after all... if he didn't lie to us."

But Pete shook his head. "I can't imagine that—Bradley is telling the truth, and Blake is an old man."

"It doesn't mean anything," Jupiter said. "We should at least put a little question mark on it. It can't do any harm."

When The Three Investigators was about to reach the salvage yard, the sun had already set. Derek didn't seem to mind because he was still standing in the driveway shooting basketball. When he recognized Pete's MG, he waved at the boys.

Although it was already late, The Three Investigators decided to study the diary at Headquarters.

Pete was the first to go into the trailer. He immediately dropped into the most comfortable of the three armchairs with a deep sigh. "What a day! First, mowing the lawn at the Robertsons'; then almost getting beaten up; then running across the hospital roof; then being treated like a felon; then we get a threatening phone call; then I almost get beaten up again at a car park... I've had enough for today."

Bob had meanwhile transferred the photos from his mobile phone to the computer so that he could read the diary pages better.

"But we have found out a few things," Jupiter remarked. "We now know that the chess set belonged to Gregor Lansky, and that is one of the reasons for wanting to own it at all costs. For Bishop Blake, however, there could be another reason. And then how does Sam Chiccarelli come in, we can only speculate."

"Speaking of Sam Chiccarelli," Pete said. "Shouldn't we perhaps tell the police? After all, we know it was he who threatened Bishop Blake at the hospital and where he lives. I wouldn't like to meet him again, so we should leave that to Inspector Cotta." Inspector Cotta was their contact at the Rocky Beach Police Department and had helped them many times in their cases, despite him being not very enthusiastic about the boys' role as investigators.

"Don't rush things," Jupiter said to the Second Investigator, because he didn't want to contact Inspector Cotta until it was really necessary. "First we study the diary. How's it going, Bob?"

"Good," said Bob. "Very good, in fact. I would say that this diary takes us a giant step forward although Irene Hammontree tells pages and pages of uninteresting stuff—how she meets her husband and moves to Rocky Beach and so forth. But there are also a few passages that are very, very revealing. I'm not quite through it yet, though."

"Tell us!" Jupiter demanded tensely.

Bob clicked through the photographed pages. "Wait, I'll read it to you:"

I'm afraid for Gregor. His career is not doing him any good. He's always lived in his own world, but the more tournaments he wins, the more he gets into chess, the more feverish his gaze becomes. And it's always that chess set! He carries it around with him all the time. Yesterday, he was here. He put the board next to him on the sofa as if it were his companion, as if I should offer coffee not only to him but also to his chess set. And he sat on the edge of the sofa all the time, looking at the clock, obviously not wanting to be here. There's something wrong with him.

"That roughly fits the image that the public also had of Gregor Lansky at the time," Jupiter said. "A hounded, slightly crazed man who lived only for the mastery of chess."

A few pages further on, Bob had spotted the next interesting passage:

I'm not sure what to think of Gregor anymore. Lately he's been telling me to watch myself, to keep an eye out for anyone watching me. If anything, I am to call him immediately, but only to do so at a phone booth. I asked him what he was talking about but he avoids answering me. He says that it's better if I don't know too much, but he doesn't want anything to happen to me.

It hurts to admit it to myself, but I really and truly believe that Gregor is suffering from delusions. He believes he is being persecuted. Then again... maybe he actually is. He used to say some unfortunate things in interviews, about communism and how much better they looked after chess in the Soviet Union. Lately he's been holding back on saying things like that, but he certainly hasn't made any friends. Nowadays, there are so many bad things going on... So is it true? Is he really being shadowed? I don't know what to believe anymore.

Pete sighed. "Okay, I don't understand that. Who is supposed to have shadowed him back then and why? And what does that have to do with communism?"

"Communism is a political idea," Jupiter explained. "And to spare you the details now, it is the ideology that the policies of some eastern European countries led by the Soviet Union used to follow."

"I know that," Pete said angrily. "The communists are the bad guys, right?"

Jupe rolled his eyes. "The 'bad guys'? Pete, I beg you. Good and evil exist in Grimm's fairy tales, but not in real life. Yes, the Soviet Union was the arch-enemy of the US for decades. In this country, in the past, communists were persecuted and punished as traitors so it wasn't very appropriate to speak positively about communism in public. Strictly speaking, it still isn't today.

"However, I can well imagine that a man like Gregor Lansky appreciated the Russians. Russian chess players were strongly promoted in their country, just like sportsmen. They were real stars, whereas chess was not taken very seriously in the Western world at that time. Incidentally, Lansky was one of a few Americans who could keep up with the world-class Russian players. Suddenly there was a chance to beat Russia in the eternal competition between East and West in another discipline—chess."

"And of course it was embarrassing when the man who might have been able to bring this glory also publicly declared that he actually quite liked the Russian policies," Bob added, before going back to reading the diary.

"And now comes the most exciting part by far," Bob announced shortly afterwards and read out the next excerpt:

There are days when so much happens that it's enough for a whole year. I hardly know where to start. Gregor has moved again—for the second time this year. He no longer felt safe in his old apartment, he said. But when I was with him yesterday, we were barely two minutes into his new apartment before he suggested a walk.

As soon as we were outside, he suddenly spoke to me in a whisper and kept turning around as if he might be followed. And he wasn't sure if the new apartment wasn't bugged. It's the same old story, but worse than ever.

It broke my heart. Suddenly everything burst out of me. I told him to his face what I thought about his state of mind—that he needed help. But he implored me to believe him. He admitted he was in trouble, but it had nothing to do with his state of mind. It had to do with his chess set. He claimed that that set was his life, but he didn't mean it figuratively. He was serious. His life depended on that chess set. It carried a secret, he said. That was the only reason he always had it with him. And if anything ever happened to him, I had to promise him that I would take the set and never give it to anyone. He meant all that quite literally. I knew I had to act. That was clearer to me than ever before, but I didn't know what to do.

But the opportunity arose all by itself three days later. It was after we met for a quick lunch at Santa Monica. I was driving home with Gregor, and at some point, he wanted to get some beer so I stopped at a shopping centre. He left his chess set on the back seat before going out alone to the shops.

I acted without thinking and took the chess set and hid it in the car boot. I locked the car and rushed to the shops looking for him. As he came out, I excitedly claimed that a stranger came up to the car, opened the door, grabbed the set and disappeared. Everything had happened very quickly and I did not get to see the thief's face.

Gregor was beside himself with rage and fear. He grabbed me and shook me. I thought he was going to hit me. He begged me to tell him the truth. It was the truth, I claimed. Eventually he believed me. Then we went back to my house in a hurry. It was all over now, he said. They would catch him and lock him up. He had to escape. Then he bid me farewell and left.

I kept the chess set in a secret place—the same place where this diary will be kept, so that neither Gregor nor anyone else will ever know about it. I don't know if I've made a big mistake. Maybe things will only get worse now. I don't know what kind of trouble Gregor is in. All I know is that it has something to do with the cursed chess set. And maybe it will stop if the set disappears. Or maybe I'll trigger a catastrophe. But I'll take the risk, otherwise I'll lose my brother forever.

12. Cotta Freaks Out

Bob stopped reading and turned to his friends.

“Wow,” said Pete. “That was really dramatic!”

“So that’s how the chess set came into Irene’s possession,” Jupiter said, “and Gregor Lansky disappeared from the scene. I suppose he never turned up at his sister’s house again?”

“Wrong assumption,” Bob corrected. “The year after Lansky’s disappearance, Irene went through a rough patch. After the press got wind that the famous chess player had disappeared, they harassed her. The wildest rumours started. Irene reproached herself terribly and was convinced that she had made a huge mistake. She believed her brother had killed himself. She examined the chess set to uncover his secret, but found nothing.

“One day, her brother suddenly reappeared. He had grown a full beard, and she hardly recognized him. He had been on the run all this time and was now living under a false name. She was relieved for he had changed a lot, for the better, and had become much calmer. She did not tell him that she took the chess set. Wait, there is something else here...” Bob scrolled through the photographed pages until he found the passage:”

I must keep this secret, for his sake. Eventually he will realize that in reality, no one is chasing him and he will stop running. He will lead a normal life. That may take a while. But I have made the right decision.

The phone rang.

“Who’s that now...” Jupiter muttered unwillingly and picked up. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter—”

“Finally I manage to reach you!” an angry voice rumbled out. “Where have you been all day?”

“Inspector Cotta! We were out, but you could have reached us on our mobile phone.”

“I don’t think I have your mobile number!” hissed Cotta.

Jupiter swallowed. The inspector was obviously not to be trifled with today. “It’s on our business card—”

“I don’t know where it is, but it doesn’t matter now,” Cotta growled. “What matters is what have you done now?”

“Er... nothing at all,” Jupiter said irritably.

“Oh? Then how come I could have Bob Andrews arrested right now if I wanted to?”

Jupiter swallowed. “Huh?”

“I received a report this afternoon of a break-in at a house north of Malibu. There is a description of a person that fits Bob exactly, and furthermore the licence plate number of his yellow Beetle. If the report hadn’t come to me by chance, but to one of my colleagues, two policemen would now be standing in front of the Andrews family’s house and taking their son away for questioning.”

“They wouldn’t,” Jupiter slipped out.

“Excuse me? Why not?”

“Because he’s... he’s not at home now,” Jupiter answered meekly. “He’s here.”

“You should really stuff your know-it-all attitude in the future, Jupiter Jones!” Cotta roared. “Have you been listening to me at all? I’m just pulling Bob’s head out of the noose—in fact, all of your heads, I may say. I don’t know how many times I have done that and how many more I have to do! In the process, I’m going out on a limb myself and jeopardizing my career by not following the prescribed official procedures. And you can’t think of anything better to say than to correct me?”

“Excuse me, Inspector Cotta.”

“Put Bob on!”

Jupiter passed the handset to Bob.

“I take it you overheard everything?”

“Yes, Inspector Cotta.”

“Explain yourself!”

“I didn’t break into that house!” Bob argued. “I went to visit someone there and he let me into his house. And then, someone else broke in and attacked him! I managed to escape before I got attacked as well.”

“Who did you visit?”

“Sam Chiccarelli.”

“Ha!” Cotta laughed out. “That’s not what she told the police!”

“Excuse me? She? No, I mean he—Sam Chiccarelli.”

“Sam Chiccarelli is a woman! She went for a jog through the mountains, noticed a suspicious yellow Beetle near her property on the way back, noted the licence plate number and surprised you in her house!”

Suddenly Jupiter hit his forehead with the flat of his hand. “I’m so stupid!” he moaned softly, then took the handset from Bob’s hand. “Inspector Cotta? I’ve just noticed our mistake in thinking. But the fact remains that Bob didn’t break into her house, someone else did. Bob surprised the intruder and mistook him for Sam Chiccarelli, as we had all assumed that ‘Sam’ was a man. In truth, he was probably the one who broke into the house. He pretended to be at home there so as not to make himself suspicious. He invited Bob in and then they were both surprised by the occupant of the house, namely the real Sam Chiccarelli, who of course had no idea that one was a real intruder and the other was innocent Bob. Moreover, Bob was the one who called the police immediately afterwards. The call should have been received by your colleagues in Malibu. If you check with them, you will—”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job!”

“Of course not, Inspector Cotta.”

Cotta was silent for a few seconds, then grumbled unwillingly: “Unfortunately, that all sounds very logical.”

“Why unfortunately?” asked Jupiter cautiously. “Would you rather have seen Bob in custody?”

“I would rather see you fall on your face for once...” He paused for a while. “All right, I believe your story.”

“We’re glad to hear that, Inspector Cotta. Who is Sam Chiccarelli, anyway?”

“I ask the questions here, Jupiter. Two more questions, to be precise. Firstly, who was the intruder?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t know. It has to do with the case of a stolen chess set, which was in the newspaper today, but the connections are still beyond our knowledge.”

“I read the article. Secondly, how does a former intelligence officer fit into this story?”

“Intelligence?”

“Sam Chiccarelli. She was with the CIA until two years ago. Didn’t you know that?”

“We didn’t know anything about her and thought she was a man until just now,” Jupiter reminded him. “But that at least explains her hand-to-hand combat technique, which is still remarkable despite her age, as Bob reported.”

“Unfortunately, it was of no use to her, because the intruder managed to escape.”

“I’m afraid I still can’t answer your question.”

“All right,” Cotta grumbled. “Then... just hold back on whatever you’re doing. I’m calling it a night!” Without another word, Cotta ended the conversation and hung up.

Silently, The Three Investigators looked at each other.

“The CIA,” Pete finally muttered. “Great. Couldn’t we not get involved with them? We’re looking for a chess set, not secret missile plans!”

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” thought Jupiter. “Especially since it’s not the first time we’ve heard something about ‘intelligence agencies’ in this case.”

“You mean the rumours surrounding Gregor Lansky’s disappearance?” asked Bob. “That the CIA might have been behind it? And Lansky’s paranoia?”

Jupiter nodded. “We should at least mentally draw a connecting line between this information and keep an eye on Sam Chiccarelli. If she was an intelligence officer, she should be reasonably trustworthy. Maybe she’ll help us now that she knows Bob isn’t an intruder.”

Bob laughed dryly. “You’re welcome to try your luck. I’d rather not meet that ninja lady again.”

The phone rang again.

“It probably occurred to Cotta that he still wanted to arrest us,” Bob guessed.

But it was not Inspector Cotta.

“Hi Juve, this is Derek. Say, you guys are investigating that chess set case, right?”

“Yes, we’re doing that, Derek. And I was with Mrs Kretchmer all day,” lied the First Investigator. “But your video was a great help—thank you very much. I’ll bring the USB drive back to you tomorrow! Basically, the case is as good as solved.”

“Oh, really? All right, then I must have been mistaken.”

Now Jupiter was pricking up his ears. “Mistaken? About what?”

“Oh, I happened to see a suspicious car.”

“What kind of car?”

“A sky-blue old thing. It’s been parked all day at the street corner where the accident happened. And now there’s someone sitting in it, staring over at your salvage yard.”

13. Easy Come, Easy Go

Jupiter sat upright. "What do you mean he's staring over at us?"

"Well, to the salvage yard entrance. I thought you might be watched. But if you've already solved the case—"

"—It's as good as solved," Jupiter said quickly. "Can you see the driver from where you are?"

"Nah, it's already too dark for that."

"Thank you, Derek! You helped us a lot for the second time!" Jupiter hung up and looked at his friends. "Fellas, we have to do something!"

"We'll call the police!" said Pete immediately. "This guy is dangerous! And a wanted intruder!"

"We don't know if it is the fake doctor in the car," Jupiter warned. "Pete, didn't you say he drove away from the hospital in a white Chevrolet? Derek was talking about a light blue car."

"That doesn't mean anything," Bob said. "Maybe he doesn't want to be discovered by us right away."

"Possibly," Jupe admitted. "But if we alert Cotta now and make a mistake, he will freak out again." Pete sighed. "What do you suggest?"

"We'll sneak up on the car. Let's at least get the licence plate number."

"Okay, but just that, not anything else!" demanded Pete.

Jupiter nodded. "Agreed."

The Three Investigators hurriedly pocketed their camera and binoculars and went outside to the open-air workshop. At the fence of the salvage yard was Green Gate One—one of the two secret exits out of the yard.

Bob checked through a knothole to see if the coast was clear. Then he triggered a mechanism to open the secret gate and stepped out to the street. Pete and Jupiter followed him. They quickly crossed the street and crept from shadow to shadow between the street lamps on the other side until they reached the street corner.

There was the car Derek had talked about—a light blue, old Mercury Lynx that looked like it had fallen out of time.

However, no one was at the driver's seat. It quickly became clear to The Three Investigators why Derek nevertheless thought he had seen someone.

"The shadow of the tree falls right on the driver's seat," Bob remarked. "From a distance, it actually looks like someone is sitting at the wheel and looking towards the gate."

Jupiter nodded in disappointment. "Derek was wrong."

"And that's not bad at all!" Pete said, relieved and was about to turn back but then his gaze fell on the First Investigator's face and something in it held him back. "Jupe, what is it?"

"This light blue car..." Jupiter murmured. "I noticed it this morning when I was on the way to Mrs Kretchmer's."

"It was here yesterday as well," Bob recalled, "because I was squatting next to it for ten minutes while we looked after Mr Blake and waited for the ambulance."

“Hmm... I know all the cars in the neighbourhood—at least I would know an old Mercury Lynx... but I’ve never seen this car before yesterday.” Jupiter’s gaze fell on the skid marks on the street from the accident. They ended right next to the driver’s door of the Mercury.

Bob and Jupiter looked at each other and thought the same thing.

“You mean this is Bishop Blake’s car?” asked Bob.

Jupiter nodded. “Blake isn’t very good on foot any more, he must have come here in a car. He only parked it so far from the entrance because the street was already so crowded with auction-goers.”

The First Investigator looked at the skid marks again and frowned. And suddenly he realized what had been bothering him about these tracks this morning. The nagging feeling turned into a question: “Why are there skid marks here?”

“Huh?” Pete wondered.

“When you see skid marks, Pete, what do you think?”

“Uh... that someone braked?”

“Exactly!” Jupiter closed his eyes and recalled what he had heard the day before and also on Derek’s video clip. “Before it banged, brakes squealed. Brakes! Someone was trying to stop their car! Look at the skid marks again! Why would the driver brake this way if he was going to hit a person on purpose?”

“Good question.”

“That’s the crucial question, Pete!” Jupiter was getting more and more excited.

“But Mr Blake was definitely hit by a car,” the Second Investigator timidly interjected.

“But not on purpose! I think the driver tried to avoid the collision! The fact that he took off afterwards is another matter, but if Bishop Blake wasn’t hit on purpose, then... then the driver probably didn’t steal the chess set! Perhaps it really was an accident, not an assault. We should have noticed all this right away but we were distracted!”

Pete and Bob looked down in embarrassment.

“True,” Bob admitted. “But tell me, Juve, if the driver wasn’t the thief... then where would the chess set be?”

Jupiter snapped his fingers enthusiastically. “That’s it, Bob! That’s it!” The First Investigator rushed to the car and, shielding his face with his hands, peered in through the windows on all sides. “Does anyone have a flashlight?” he asked urgently.

“Uh, yeah,” Pete said, handing him a small LED flashlight dangling from his key chain. “Are you going to tell me what flash of inspiration you’ve just had?”

“It is possible,” Bob answered instead, “quite possible that the chess set wasn’t stolen at all.”

“What?” cried Pete. “But it’s gone!”

“Here’s something!” Jupiter announced excitedly as he shone the light into the footwell of the passenger seat.

“The chess set?” Bob wondered.

“No. Bishop Blake’s walking stick.”

Bob dropped his shoulders in disappointment.

The walking stick remained the only thing they spotted through the windows. The rest of the interior of the car was very tidy.

“Pete,” Jupiter said, “you told me that Mr Blake couldn’t really remember the accident.”

“Yes. It must have been the shock.”

“Let’s reconstruct what happened...” Juve decided. “Mr Blake carries the box with the chess set under his arm and the walking stick in his hand. He leaves the salvage yard through

the main gate. He wants to come here where his car is parked. What then?"

"He steps on the street and gets hit by the car," Pete said.

"No." Jupiter shook his head and pointed to the walking stick in the footwell, "otherwise the walking stick wouldn't be inside the car... So what did he do?"

"He's walking to his car and he's got one problem, which is a cardboard box under one arm and a walking stick in the other hand," Bob reflected slowly. "But he has to have one hand free to unlock his car. And he did, otherwise the walking stick wouldn't be in it."

"Very good, Bob," Jupe praised. "Look, this car must be over thirty years old... It wouldn't have remote or central locking. This means that on the outside, you have to lock and unlock with a key, or from the inside, using the lock tabs... Do you remember whether Mr Blake is right- or left-handed?"

Bob remembered back to the moment Blake had put the credit card in his wallet and said: "Should be right-handed."

"And the box? Did he carry it on the left or the right?"

Bob thought for a while and then said: "Under his right arm. He held the stick with his left hand."

"Correct!" Jupe affirmed. "I saw that as well from Derek's video clip... So now he has to put the cardboard box somewhere else before unlocking his car. He arrives at the passenger door, leans the stick against the car, puts the box on the roof, for example, takes out his car key, unlocks the passenger door, puts the stick inside and closes the door again."

"He could also have put the box on the passenger seat," Bob said.

"Yes." Jupiter tried to open the passenger door but it was locked. "But he didn't. Instead, he locks this door again. Suppose if he had put the box on the passenger seat, the thief would have had to steal the key from Blake, who was lying on the street, unlock the passenger door, take out the box and lock the door back again. There was not enough time for that. There was a bang and a few seconds later, the car went off. So, Blake puts the stick in the car and the box is still on the roof. Then he locks the door..."

"And then he gets hit!" shouted Pete.

"Not yet!" Jupiter objected. "Because he is still on the passenger side of the car, next to the walkway. There are two possibilities from this point on... One, he goes around the car and is hit as soon as he is on the street, and the chess set, which is on the roof, for example, is stolen from him. Two, he goes to the boot, puts the chess set in it, goes to the driver's door and only then he gets hit."

"And the perpetrator steals the chess set from the boot."

"Not if Blake locked it," Jupe said. "He just paid seven thousand dollars for the chess set. He definitely locked the boot if possibility number two is true."

Bob stepped to the boot and tried to open it. It was indeed locked. Then he tested the driver's door. It opened!

"Aha!" Bob remarked, puzzled.

"What does the fact that the driver's door is unlocked tell us now?" asked Jupiter.

"That Blake had unlocked it and was about to open the door to get into the car when he was hit." Bob deduced.

"Exactly! And he still would have his car key in his hand because he was going to drive off at any moment. Did you see a key when Blake was lying on the street?" asked Jupiter.

Pete and Bob shook their heads.

"Me neither."

Three pairs of eyes simultaneously turned to the street. There was nothing there, of course. But a second after Pete crouched down to look under the car, he let out a low cry. The

Second Investigator rose triumphantly and presented his friends with a car key dangling from his right index finger. “Tada!”

They rushed to the boot, Jupiter nodded to Pete and the Second Investigator put the key in the lock and turned it. Then he flipped up the heavy boot lid.

And there it was—lying between the jack and the spare wheel was the box. Carefully, Jupe took it out and opened it. The chess set was still in there.

Bob shook his head slowly. “Can you believe it? All this time when we’re looking for fake doctors, sports teachers and Pontiac drivers, the chess set is just right outside our doorstep.”

“Mr Blake only believed the set was stolen because I told him that it had disappeared,” Pete said. “After all, he couldn’t remember. But what I don’t quite understand is why it wasn’t stolen.”

“Because it would have taken too much time,” Bob reminded him.

“No, I mean later. The driver could have come back and prised open the boot lid.”

“He could have,” Jupiter agreed, “but he didn’t. There’s only one logical explanation for that—the driver had absolutely nothing to do with this chess set.”

Pete sighed deeply. “Okay, then I suggest that we now find out what makes the set so valuable, and then the case will be solved, and we can all go home satisfied.”

“Agreed,” Jupiter said with a grin. “Let’s go back to Headquarters!”

A car approached. None of The Three Investigators paid attention until the engine howled and the tyres squealed. They whirled around and was blinded by the glare of the front headlights. The car sped towards them.

“Look out!” Bob leapt back to the walkway and Pete was with him a second later. Jupiter stumbled over the kerb and dropped the box.

The car braked, someone jumped out, but they couldn’t see him because of the blinding headlights.

“The chess set!” Pete shouted and rushed towards the box. A kick from the darkness sent him staggering backwards and crashing into Bob. When they were on their feet again, the car door slammed shut.

“No!” Pete shouted, as he got to his feet and charged blindly towards and past the headlights. He got hold of the passenger door handle. But when he tried to pull it, the driver accelerated.

Pete was able to take a look behind the wheel before the door handle was ripped out of his hand. Then the car sped away with the engine howling.

The Three Investigators could only watch the white Chevrolet helplessly as it shot down the street, barely slowing down at the next intersection and lurching around the bend.

14. Who is the Fake Doctor?

Only when the roar of the engine had completely faded did Jupiter regain his voice. “This can’t be true!”

“Did you see him, Pete?” asked Bob breathlessly.

The Second Investigator nodded. “It was the fake doctor. He must have been watching us the whole time.”

“The car came out from the side street, I think,” Bob said. “From there, he would have had a good view of the salvage yard, and he was completely in the dark himself.”

“That’s why Derek only noticed Bishop Blake’s car, not our actual observer’s,” growled Jupiter. Slowly the shock wore off and gave way to grim anger. “What a mess, we had the chess set in our hands—for thirty seconds... and then this guy grabs it away from us again because I was stupid enough to drop it. And we still don’t have the faintest clue who he even is!”

Bob sighed and tried to console Jupiter. “It’s not like all is lost. After all, we still have a few leads we can take care of tomorrow—Sam Chiccarelli, the rest of the diary—”

“Tomorrow? Forget it, Bob, we’ll take care of it now!” Jupe insisted.

“Now?” cried Pete, horrified. “But it’s... already really late and the day is long and—”

“—And by tomorrow the chess set may long be on the other side of the world!” Jupiter exclaimed. “Now, Pete—right now!”

Ten minutes later, Bob and Pete had informed their parents that they were going to spend the night with Jupiter, while Jupiter had made Aunt Mathilda believe that he was at Bob’s house.

Very soon, they were in Pete’s MG on their way to Malibu. The Second Investigator had tried to convince Jupiter that they should call Sam Chiccarelli instead of going straight to her house but the objection had bounced off The First Investigator.

“She could hang up,” was all he said.

After another half hour’s drive through the dark mountains of Malibu, they had reached Sam Chiccarelli’s house. Pete drove his car right into the driveway. This time, there was no reason to hide.

Lights were on behind the windows. The door lock had been repaired in the meantime, as Bob noticed with a glance.

Before The Three Investigators even got to press the bell, the door was opened with a jerk. Bob immediately recognized the small, wiry woman with the short grey hair. She glared suspiciously at The Three Investigators. When her gaze fell on Bob, the suspicion turned to anger.

“You again! What are you doing here? Get off my property!” she yelled. “No, wait, just hang around until the police get here.” She took a step back into the house and was about to slam the door in their faces when Jupe put his foot forward to block it.

“Miss Chiccarelli,” Jupiter said calmly. “We are here with peaceful intentions and just want to ask you a few questions. Here is our card.”

Jupiter handed her the business card of The Three Investigators, but she only glanced at it.

“Didn’t Inspector Cotta speak to you?” Jupe asked.

Sam Chiccarelli looked at him, unimpressed. “Yes, he did. He said something about teenage investigators who often go overboard but are always on the good side. But what does a small-town cop like him know?”

“Miss Chiccarelli, I really didn’t break into your house,” Bob defended himself. “I merely surprised the intruder and didn’t realize he was one.”

“So why did you run?”

“Because I didn’t realize that you were the occupant of this house... and because you scared me.”

A thin smile played around her mouth for a moment before she became serious again. “What do you want from me?”

“We are investigating a case involving a chess set that some people are after. In the meantime, we have found out that it once belonged to the famous chess player Gregor Lansky. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Of course it means something to me. So?”

“We know from Inspector Cotta that you used to work for the CIA,” Jupe continued. “There are also suspicions that Lansky was monitored by them. Does that ring any bells?”

Sam Chiccarelli first looked at the First Investigator in disbelief, and then she laughed mockingly. “I was in the CIA, indeed. Do you think I’m going to share the experiences of my professional life with three greenhorns?”

“So Lansky was under surveillance,” Jupiter attempted a shot in the dark. “And you had something to do with it.”

“A lot of people were under surveillance at the time—actually, everyone who behaved suspiciously,” Miss Chiccarelli said diplomatically. “Lansky, as a Russian sympathizer, was certainly one of them. It wasn’t a nice time, but it’s over now. Is that all?”

“No,” said the First Investigator quickly. “We still have two questions. The intruder you surprised—did you know him?”

Sam Chiccarelli slowly shook her head. Jupiter could not tell if she was hiding something or not.

“Last question?”

“It concerns our client, Mr Bishop Blake—” Jupiter didn’t get to formulate his question because Sam Chiccarelli responded immediately.

“You work for Bishop Blake?” She stared at the boys for a moment in disbelief. “Are you kidding?”

“Er... no, ma’am. I take it from your reaction that you know Mr Blake?”

“If you work for my dear former colleague, why do you come to me? Surely he can explain all the connections to you in detail!” She said this in a tone that suggested little affection for Mr Blake.

“He was your colleague?” asked Jupiter in surprise.

Miss Chiccarelli grimaced angrily. Jupiter already didn’t believe she would speak to them anymore, but then she said: “Bishop Blake was one of those who made the period of surveillance and spying so unpleasant. You’d better stay away from him.”

“Why?”

She did not answer.

“Miss Chiccarelli,” Jupiter said urgently. “Bishop Blake was hit by a car on the street. Before he lost consciousness, he called your name. Why did he do that?”

“My name?” she exclaimed in surprise.

“Yes. We don’t know why he did it, but we suspect it was meant as a hint... or a call for help.”

Sam Chiccarelli looked at The Three Investigators for a long time. In an icy voice, she said: “That wasn’t a call for help, you smart alecks. That was a warning.” And with that she slammed the door in their faces.

“I’m at a loss,” Pete confessed as they sat back in the car and drove back towards Malibu on the night-time Kanan Dume Road. They had tried a few more times to get Miss Chiccarelli to talk through the closed door, but she had simply ignored them. “... Completely at a loss. I don’t understand anything anymore.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, lost in thought. “Bishop Blake was also in the CIA,” he murmured. “And Gregor Lansky was actually under surveillance... by Mr Blake himself? By Sam Chiccarelli? She could have explained all the connections to us, I’m sure... but she wouldn’t. Either way, as long as we don’t have the chess set—”

Bob let out a scream so loud that Pete almost lost the wheel. “Geez, Bob, don’t scare me like that! This is a narrow road!”

“I found something,” Bob said breathlessly. The others hadn’t noticed that while sitting in the back seat, Bob had taken out his mobile phone and was looking at Irene Hammontree’s diary again on the small display.

“Listen to this, it’s an entry from one of the last pages—five years after Irene had made the chess set disappear:”

I never dared to hope that things would turn out like this. Gregor is still a strange, headstrong person. He’s on guard, living in fear from an unknown danger, which to this day, I don’t know for sure whether it’s imaginary or not... even Ruth may not know—that’s the woman he met and married in the meantime...

But apart from that, Gregor is a loving husband, and a father since yesterday. I’ve become an aunt! Ruth and he named their son Griffin—Griffin Silverman—as he goes by Ruth’s surname because Gregor is still afraid his identity will be exposed. The little boy is fine. He was born with a cleft lip, but it’s not severe and I’m sure it can be operated on soon.

Bob lowered the camera and grinned triumphantly. “Is anyone willing to believe in coincidence?”

“No,” Jupiter said excitedly. “The age is about right too. So our mysterious fake doctor is Gregor Lansky’s son!”

15. Saving the Chess Set

Finding Griffin Silverman's address was a piece of cake as there was only one person of that name listed in the phone book. He lived on Alta Avenue in Santa Monica. It was almost midnight when The Three Investigators reached the street. Despite its proximity to the beach and the big boulevards, Alta Avenue was in a quiet residential area where no one was hanging around outside at this time of the night.

Griffin Silverman lived in a compact concrete cube with large windows that stood on a narrow plot of land, squeezed between other narrow plots and half-hidden behind a palm garden. A light was on in the upper window.

When they spotted the white Chevrolet in front of the house, any doubt that they were really on the right track was dispelled.

"Don't you think we should call Inspector Cotta?" Pete asked after he had parked the car a little further along the road side. "I mean, we know everything now, don't we? We know his name and address, we have enough information for Cotta to arrest him..."

"And the chess set? If we hand it over to the police now, we'll convict the criminal, but we won't solve the mystery." Jupiter shook his head decisively. "I want to know what that chess set is all about."

Pete sighed. "That figures. All right, what do you suggest?"

"We'll sneak up and see if Griffin Silverman is alone first," Jupe decided.

"And then?" Pete asked.

"Let's improvise." Jupiter winked and got out of the car. Bob and Pete followed him.

Alta Avenue was an unsuitable place to observe the house as there were no hiding places. The buildings were too dense, and whoever looked out of the window would immediately spot The Three Investigators.

"If he sees us, that's it," Bob remarked. "He would be warned immediately."

"He knows you two above all," Jupiter noted.

"He almost ran you over earlier," Pete said. "He should remember you as well."

"Yes, but it was dark then. With any luck... hand me your cap, Pete!" Jupiter put on Pete's cap.

"Great cover," Pete said wryly.

"It will do..." The First Investigator was convinced. "You stay here, I'll have a look around inconspicuously."

Jupiter strolled off. As he passed Silverman's house and looked up at the lit window, he saw the shadow of a person on the far wall of the room. Obviously, someone was sitting at a desk. However, nothing more could be made out of that.

The First Investigator went to the next intersection and turned back. On the way back, he could see the shadow standing up. Now he saw Silverman. He was carrying something under his arm, switched off the light and left the room.

Jupiter stopped. For a moment, the house remained dark and silent. Then he heard a door squeak. The sound came from the back of the house. The First Investigator hesitated only briefly and then walked towards the house. There was a courtyard or garden at the back. It was enclosed by a high but old wooden fence with narrow gaps in between some boards.

Jupiter figured that the only way to take a look was from the neighbour's side of the fence. He quickly entered the neighbouring property and it took him a while to find a gap between the boards wide enough to see through.

Behind the house was a barren courtyard with only rubbish bins, piles of empty bottles, paint buckets and old car tyres. There was also some shabby garden furniture and a barbecue.

A little light fell through the open back door and Jupiter saw a tall, blond man. He was standing at the grill, carrying the chess set under his arm. For a few seconds, the man looked into the empty grill, lost in his thoughts. Then he bent down, picked up a bottle and tipped its contents over the grill grate. He pulled something out of his pocket and a second later a match flared up. He threw it into the grill. Suddenly bright flames leapt up. In the flickering light, Jupiter watched Silverman turn the chess set between his hands.

Jupiter froze. His thoughts raced. Was Silverman going to burn the chess set? He had to do something, and fast! The First Investigator turned on his heel and ran back to the road, wanting to get to Bob and Pete first, but there was no time for that. He waved to his friends who were watching him from a distance, then rushed to Silverman's car and yanked the handle of the driver's door. The car was locked. Nothing happened. Jupiter ran to the front of the car, sat on the bonnet and used his entire body weight to push the bonnet up and down.

The alarm system activated. The car started honking and flashing. At that moment, Bob and Pete reached him.

"Jupe!" cried Pete breathlessly. "What are you doing?"

"Come on!" Jupiter dragged his friends away from the road to the wooden fence. He quickly led them to the gap into the fence and looked into Silverman's property. They could see Silverman running angrily into the house. He had left the chess set on the pile of car tyres.

"Silverman was just about to burn the chess set," Jupiter explained tersely.

"What?" cried Bob. "But—"

"I had to distract him somehow... but he won't be gone long. You climb over there now and get the set, Pete."

"Excuse me?" Pete was completely horrified. "I can't—"

"Yes, you can," Jupe insisted. "Hurry up, we don't have much time!"

"But—"

"Please, Pete!" Jupiter clasped his hands together to give him a leg-up.

With panic in his eyes, the Second Investigator lifted his foot and let Jupiter hoist him up. He braced himself with his arms, swung his legs over the fence and was over. Jupiter saw Griffin Silverman step out onto the road on the other side of the house and look around. There was nobody near his car, of course.

Jupiter continued to keep watch at Silverman through the gap.

"Where is the chess set?" asked Pete frantically.

"Over there on the car tyres."

The Second Investigator ran over and grabbed it. "I'll throw it over to you!" he murmured. "Look out!"

The chess set sailed over the fence. Bob caught it deftly.

The alarm system died away. Griffin Silverman pocketed his car key, looked around once more, and then returned into the house.

"Quick, Pete!" urged Bob. "He's coming back!"

"I don't know how to get up here!"

"Just do it!"

Pete dragged two paint buckets over, put them on top of each other, climbed up and got hold of the top edge of the fence. Elegantly he pulled himself up, rolled to the other side and

plopped down on the ground next to his friends.

“Now let’s get out of here!” he whispered.

The Three Investigators ran off without looking back. They ran to Pete’s MG, jumped in and before the passenger door closed, Pete started the car and accelerated.

Jupiter looked back through the rear window. Just as they turned the next corner, Silverman reappeared on the road, furious. A second later, The Three Investigators had disappeared from his field of vision.

16. The Queen's Knight Opening

It took quite a while for Pete's heartbeat to calm down again. Bob had to remind him several times to slow down, but the Second Investigator had the feeling that he was being followed the whole time, although Jupiter kept a constant eye on the traffic and was quite sure that Silverman was not after them.

"Man!" Pete kept saying. "Man, Jupe! Don't you ever ask me to do that again!"

"There was no other way," the First Investigator defended himself.

"I know. Still, don't ever ask me to do that again!"

By the time they reached Rocky Beach, his excitement had subsided a little.

They used Green Gate One to get into the salvage yard. When they were inside Headquarters, they went into the lab at the back of the trailer, cleared the table, switched on the bright light, put the chess set in front of them and looked at it.

"It looks like a normal chess set," Bob observed, weighing it in his hand.

"But it's not, that's for sure," Jupiter said. "So, let's examine it systematically... The chess set itself is relatively heavy because it is made of solid wood components. The playing surface is slightly bigger than a vinyl LP record sleeve, and underneath it is a storage compartment for the playing pieces.

"On the playing surface, the squares are about 40 by 40 mm. For the light squares, I'm guessing maple, the dark squares are probably mahogany. The frame and the base are also made of mahogany. It has small decorations on the frame that imitate antique Persian craftsmanship, as it seems to me, since chess comes from Persia.

"Brass latches are posted on opposite sides of the frame so that the chess board can be detached from the storage compartment." Jupiter undid the latches and lifted the chess board up. "The chess board itself is about 20 mm thick. In the storage compartment, there are dividers to create individual slots for the chess pieces. The slots are lined with black felt. I can see that all the chess pieces are here.

"So, fellas... that was the rough overview," Jupe concluded. "Something about this chess set is special. Let's find out what it is!"

The Three Investigators set to work. On the computer, Bob searched for the meaning of the frame decorations, while Jupiter and Pete looked at the board, storage compartment, and chess pieces.

Jupiter examined the chess board closely by pressing and pushing on the individual tiles that made up the squares. He felt very slight individual tile movements—only a fraction of a millimetre. That indicated that they were somehow plugged to each other and not glued together or to the base. Perhaps there was something underneath them. He grabbed a fine screwdriver and used it to pick at the groove between the tiles. Eventually, one of them came loose and Jupiter had the dark 'c3' square in his hand.

"Aha!" exclaimed the First Investigator triumphantly. Bob immediately rushed over to see the discovery... but there was nothing under that square except a wooden base.

"Wow," Pete remarked dryly. "A loose square tile. I'm overwhelmed."

Jupiter tried to lever off more squares, but although they could be moved a little, they were all securely fastened together. Disappointed, he put the 'c3' square back in its place. It

jammed just enough to stay in place and did not drop off when he turned the board over. "Apart from the loose tile, the rest of the board seems to be well-constructed."

"That makes sense," Bob said, "otherwise all the squares would fall off if you turned the board upside down. That one loose tile was probably a defect."

The Second Investigator began to yawn, and once he started, he could hardly stop. "I was already completely dead tired three hours ago. Now it's one o'clock and we have school tomorrow. I want to go home since we can't figure anything out now."

"Your parents think you're spending the night here," Jupiter reminded him.

"I don't care. I want to go to my bed."

"I think Pete is right," Bob said. "Regarding the patterns on the side, Jupe, you were right that they could be Persian, but they don't mean anything. They're just patterns. The chess set is a disappointment. Even Irene Hammontree found nothing, because there's nothing in it—nothing at all."

"But there must be something," Jupe insisted. "There has to be, else why so many people are after it."

"Knowing you, you'll spend the rest of the night here searching," Pete guessed. "Have fun with it. I'll see you tomorrow at school when you'd probably have dark circles around your eyes. I'm out of it now. Good night!"

"I'll come with you," Bob said, "but could you wait another five minutes, Pete? I want to quickly finish up reading on Persian art, then—"

"No," Pete said firmly. "Sorry, Bob, but I really can't take it any more. Come with me now or I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, see you tomorrow then!" Bob said.

Pete waved wearily and left the trailer through the Cold Gate while Bob sat back at the computer.

Jupiter remained at the lab table, propped his chin on his left hand and stared thoughtfully at the chess board. He traced the frame decorations with his right index finger. Then he inspected the chess pieces again one by one and positioned them on the board. For a while, he thought about what he could do next but finally, he removed the pieces from the board in frustration. A game of chess would not help him unravel the mystery of the board.

Jupiter flinched. What if it would?

Without knowing exactly what he was doing, he positioned the chess pieces back on the board. Then he picked up the white pawn on 'e2' to place it on 'e4', as he always did when he started a game. But after a moment's thought, he put the pawn back and instead moved the knight from 'b1' to 'c3'. This was the Queen's Knight Opening—the favoured opening move of Gregor Lansky.

"And now what?" he muttered to himself.

"Did you say something?" Bob said from next door.

"No... uh... yes. I'm figuring how playing a game would help... but it doesn't get me anywhere. Not even with 'b1' to 'c3'—the Queen's Knight Opening."

"What did you say? 'c3'? Wasn't that the square you took out earlier?" asked Bob.

Jupiter sat upright. Bob was right. But did that mean anything? For a second time, the First Investigator took the pieces off the board. Then he pressed on the square 'b1'. Nothing happened. He tried 'c3'. Also nothing. Then he used the screwdriver to lever the 'c3' square out of the board again. There was still nothing underneath. But now Jupiter discovered something that had escaped him earlier. He could see that the square tiles surrounding the 'c3' space were interlocked together edge to edge using tongue and groove joints. He pushed

against one of the tiles and found that the joints were a bit loose and that allowed the slight movement. What if the tiles could slide between each other, just like in a sliding tile puzzle?

Jupiter put his index finger on 'c2' and managed to push the tile onto the vacant 'c3' space. "Bob, come here!"

Bob entered the laboratory.

"Look at this, you can move the square tiles around like a sliding tile puzzle!" Jupe exclaimed. "We didn't try this out earlier!"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "So what? We already saw that there was just the wooden base underneath that square."

"I thought maybe if I play the Queen's Knight Opening with the squares, that is, move the square 'b1' to the vacant position of 'c3'..." Jupiter tried it out. He pushed the wooden square tiles back and forth until the 'b1' tile landed on the 'c3' space.

Then they heard something click.

"If you move the 'b1' tile to the right place, you trigger a hidden mechanism! The Queen's Knight Opening is the key!" Jupe exclaimed and they looked at each other tensely.

But nothing happened. Then the First Investigator lifted the board to look at the bottom, but he realized he only had half the board in his hand. The bottom half remained on the table, revealing a hollow cavity!

"Jupe!" shouted Bob. "You've found the secret compartment! You've actually found it!"

There was a small envelope in the cavity. Jupiter picked it up. Underneath lay something else—a small black plastic roll, no bigger than a roll of adhesive tape.

"Looks like a ribbon for an old typewriter," Bob said frowning.

"Only that it's not a textile tape wound on it," Jupiter noted. "It's a kind of film strip!" Carefully, Jupiter unwound a few centimetres of the plastic strip and held it up to the light. Immediately, both of them knew what it was.

"It's a microfilm!" Bob exclaimed. "Just like what they used to have in libraries before computerization. Microfilms work like negatives in old photo cameras. However, the photos are extremely small, much too small to see anything with the naked eye. With the help of microfilm, it was possible to fit a lot of information into a very small space."

"Yes, Bob," Jupiter added. "In those days, spies used microfilm to smuggle data and secret plans unnoticed. But you need a special machine to be able to read the contents."

Bob held his breath. "And what does that mean?"

"This means that Gregor Lansky was really under surveillance at the time, and rightly so... because he was a spy."

At that moment, they heard the refrigerator door of the Cold Gate being opened outside.

"Pete's forgotten something again, the scatterbrain," said Bob. "He'll be in for a surprise when he sees what you've discovered, Jupe!"

The door to the trailer swung open.

"Well, Pete, what is it this time?" Jupiter said from the lab.

"I couldn't do anything," said the Second Investigator, his voice trembling. "He ambushed me!"

Bob and Jupiter came out from the lab. At the trailer door stood Pete, chalk-white in the face and his eyes dilated with fear. He was being held by Griffin Silverman, who had a gun to the Second Investigator's head.

17. Double Game

The tall man with the scar above his upper lip looked at them grimly. "You have forgotten that I know where you live. And your friend was kind enough to show me the entrance to these lovely quarters as well. Now, once and for all, no more of this kid stuff." He pushed Pete away from him so that all three boys were standing together. Then he pointed his gun at them. "Give me the chess set and don't ever show your faces again after this!"

Nobody moved.

"Give me the chess set now!"

Jupiter went back into the lab, took the top half of the chess board from the table and handed it to Silverman. He immediately noticed something different.

"You found the secret compartment!" he gasped, startled.

The First Investigator nodded.

"You discovered the secret compartment?" Pete asked.

"Give me what was in it!" shouted Silverman angrily. "Right now!"

But it did not come to that. Suddenly there was a rumbling outside. Silverman just managed to turn around as the door flew open and Sam Chiccarelli jumped into the trailer. She instantly pounced on Silverman. It was not five seconds before she had disarmed the man. He fought back with all his might, but The Three Investigators immediately rushed to her aid and a short time later, they had overpowered Silverman together.

While Sam Chiccarelli, Pete and Bob held the man down, Jupiter dug out a roll of parcel tape and began to tie Griffin Silverman's hands and feet. He soon gave up resisting and finally sat grim-faced in one of the armchairs.

"Miss Chiccarelli," Jupiter took the floor, gasping. "What are you doing here?"

"What kind of a story are you three guys involved in and why didn't that Inspector Cotta spank you for it long ago?" she asked.

Pete waved it off. "He's done it a few times. It just doesn't help."

Sam Chiccarelli shook her head unwillingly. "After you came to see me, this whole story didn't leave me alone. So I got in my car and drove to Rocky Beach to find out who you really are and what you're up to. I had your business card, but as soon as I arrived, I saw from the car how this guy attacked your friend. So I followed the two of you here. Can you tell me what you would have done if I hadn't shown up?"

Bob and Pete looked to the floor in dismay. Jupiter did too, but his eyes fell on Silverman's gun. He picked it up. It seemed suspiciously light to him. Then he spotted the small replica sticker on the bottom. "This is not real at all," he remarked.

"Of course it's not real," Silverman said grimly, sliding around on the chair to get into a more comfortable position. "I've only had it as a deterrent since I was mugged once a few years ago."

Pete didn't know whether to be relieved or angry. "Well, the deterrent definitely worked."

"So, boys, I don't have all night," Sam Chiccarelli interjected. "I'd finally like to know what's going on here!"

"You're not the only one," Pete confessed.

Sam Chiccarelli turned to Griffin Silverman and asked: “Who are you and why did you break into my house?”

Silverman was grimly silent.

“I think we should tell the story from the beginning,” Jupiter suggested, “otherwise we’ll all just get confused.” He took a deep breath. “Gregor Lansky was a spy for the Soviet intelligence.”

“What?” Pete cried, but he seemed to be the only one surprised by this finding. “How do you know it all of a sudden?”

“I found the secret compartment in the chess set.” He took the bottom part of the board out of the lab and showed it to the others.

“This was hidden in this cavity,” Jupiter said, presenting the microfilm. “Whatever secret information is stored on it is not important for now. But the microfilm and the secret compartment are proof that Gregor Lansky was not suffering from paranoia. The rumours were true. He was a spy, and his son wanted to keep that secret at all costs—especially from Bishop Blake, who was also involved in the story. I think he was trying to expose Lansky... Am I right, Miss Chiccarelli?”

Sam Chiccarelli nodded curtly. “Yes... Blake has tracked down enemy spies.”

Jupiter turned to Griffin Silverman. “That’s why you were after this chess set... and after you failed to discover the secret compartment, you preferred to burn the whole set and its secret before it fell into the wrong hands. Am I right?”

The anger dissipated from Griffin Silverman’s face and gave way to an expression of reproach. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said quietly. “Bishop Blake is a monster. He almost destroyed my father’s life.”

“It seems to me that your father got himself into trouble all by himself,” Jupiter said.

“That’s true,” Silverman admitted. “But Blake hounded him, even years after my father stopped working for Soviet intelligence.”

“It was Mr Blake’s job to expose spies, whether they were still active or not... and I suppose that there is no statute of limitations for treason.” Jupiter looked over at Miss Chiccarelli, expecting confirmation, but she suddenly seemed strangely absent. She leaned in the doorway with her arms folded and looked at the bound Silverman very thoughtfully. Something dark clouded her gaze.

“Am I right, Miss Chiccarelli?” Jupiter repeated.

She ignored his question. “I want to hear his story,” she said without taking her eyes off Silverman, “from the beginning...”

Griffin Silverman seemed to realize that there was no point in keeping quiet any more. Very slowly and deliberately, he began to speak: “My father was a world-famous chess player until one day he disappeared from public view. But I only found out about that when I was already a grown man. As a child, my parents were just people who moved around very often. They seemed to be running away from something or someone—but I didn’t realize that at the time. It was only when my mother died and my father himself became ill that he gradually told me his life story. I only learned the whole truth three years ago when he was dying.”

“Your father is dead?” asked Bob.

Silverman nodded. “As a young man, he was very fond of the political system in the Soviet Union. The world there seemed fairer to him—not least because chess had a much higher status there than here. In Russia, chess players were celebrated stars. Here, they were at best misunderstood weirdos.

“My father often travelled around the world to play in tournaments. Many of these tournaments took place in the Soviet Union. There, it had been noticed that he sympathized with communism. Eventually he was asked if he wanted to work for the Soviet intelligence. My father said yes. He was not a spy in the classical sense. He didn’t spy on anyone. What he did was to act as a courier. For this purpose, he had his chess set built, with which he was seen all the time from then on. In the secret compartment, he transported orders and information between East and West, and handed them over to secret middlemen.”

“The mechanism that opens the secret compartment is made entirely of wood,” Jupiter said. “That’s probably why nothing suspicious was detected at the security checks in the airports at the time.”

“Right,” said Silverman. “What the secret information was, my father didn’t know and didn’t care. I think he liked the role of a secret agent smuggling government secrets undetected.”

“But then they got onto him,” Bob surmised.

“Yes. I don’t know the details, but somehow Bishop Blake was on to him. Blake had a hunch, but no proof. But my father feared him and lived for years in fear of being discovered. One day, his chess set was stolen in broad daylight from a car he was in. He was certain that Bishop Blake was the thief. My father fully expected that he would be arrested, charged and imprisoned immediately. So he went into hiding... and never emerged again because from that day on, he feared being caught by Bishop Blake... until his death.” Griffin Silverman sighed heavily.

“I only found out about all that towards the end of his life,” Silverman continued. “He regretted what he had done then... and he regretted not stopping immediately when it became dangerous for him. But then it was too late and he had to end his chess career to save his freedom.”

“And you wanted to save his reputation and his name,” Jupiter said.

Silverman nodded. “Yes... Gregor Lansky, the world-famous chess player and almost world champion, died the day his chess set disappeared and he had to go into hiding. After that, he built a new life for himself under a different name. He met my mother, I was born and he buried the past.

“I didn’t want this past to be dragged into the light now and spread in the press. He didn’t deserve that. He was happy with his new life! Of course he made big mistakes... but who benefits from condemning a dead man?” Silverman’s gaze darkened. “No one, except one person—Bishop Blake. Even three years after my father’s death, that man won’t let go and is still trying to uncover the truth. He’s obsessed with it! That’s sick!”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip slowly. “If I understand all this correctly, neither you nor your father had any idea where the chess set was all this time.”

Silverman nodded. “Yes... He and I always thought that Blake had stolen it back then and my father had only just escaped from him. But then I read the story in the paper about the auction and the chess set and the accident. Bishop Blake’s name was mentioned, otherwise I wouldn’t have pricked up my ears. But then I realized it must have been about my father’s chess set. Why else would Blake have paid so much for it? But where it actually was all this time, if Blake didn’t have it, and then why it reappeared so suddenly—I have no idea.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other uneasily.

“We know,” Bob finally said. Jupiter nodded encouragingly at him and Bob told Silverman what they had learned from his aunt’s diary.

For Silverman, it was a shock. “So it was her!”

“You are welcome to read your aunt’s diary,” Jupiter offered. “Maybe then you will understand her reasons better.”

Silverman barely had time to digest this news, because now Sam Chiccarelli turned to him and said: “Why did you break into my house?”

It took a moment for Silverman to regain his composure. “Because Bishop Blake told me at the hospital that you had the chess set.”

“He also mentioned your name after he had been hit by the car,” Jupiter reminded Miss Chiccarelli.

“And he claimed to me that he had never heard the name ‘Sam Chiccarelli’,” Pete added. “I don’t understand anything anymore.”

Jupiter looked at Miss Chiccarelli promptly. “Now, how about you tell us your side of the whole story?”

“There is nothing to tell,” Miss Chiccarelli claimed. “None of this means anything to me. I heard the chess set thing for the first time today.”

Jupiter frowned. “But you knew that Gregor Lansky was being shadowed by the CIA... and you know Mr Blake. There must be a connection! What were you getting at when you told us that Blake mentioned your name as a warning?”

Sam Chiccarelli was expressionlessly silent.

“Miss Chiccarelli?”

“These are government secrets.”

“Well, listen!” Pete got upset. “We present you here with one secret after another and you—”

“I have nothing to say,” Miss Chiccarelli interrupted him, “because they are none of your business. And neither is that, for that matter.” She pointed to the microfilm Jupiter was still holding. “I’m confiscating that piece of evidence.”

“You are no longer with the CIA,” Jupiter replied. “You can’t confiscate anything.”

“You bet I can,” said Miss Chiccarelli, taking two quick steps towards Jupiter, wresting the microfilm from him and putting it in her pocket.

“You have no right to do that,” said the First Investigator angrily, but Sam Chiccarelli only laughed.

“I’ll call Inspector Cotta now,” Jupiter announced resolutely. “We’ll see what he has to say about it.”

“Go ahead,” Miss Chiccarelli replied equanimously.

But Jupiter did not step to the phone. Instead, he went into the lab, took the envelope that had also been hidden in the chess set and opened it. A small stack of photos slipped out.

Jupiter looked at them. They were black and white pictures of two men at a street corner, obviously taken from a hidden location. It was a series of photos showing one man giving the other a small parcel and then walking on. In the background was a street sign that said something in a writing that the First Investigator could not read. It only took Jupiter a moment to recognize one of the men. He had already worn the glasses then.

Miss Chiccarelli now noticed that Jupiter was not picking up the phone. “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at the photos that were also hidden in the chess set,” Jupiter said calmly. “I didn’t mention them, did I? Well, I’ll be—”

Immediately Miss Chiccarelli rushed up to attempt to snatch the photos from Jupiter, but Bob and Pete were quicker and blocked her from doing so.

“Too late, Miss Chiccarelli,” Juve said. “I’ve already looked at them... and I think I understand a little better now what really happened.”

“What is it, Jupe?” asked Bob excitedly. “What are in those photos?”

“Bishop Blake in his younger days... and somewhere in the Eastern Bloc, as the street sign in Cyrillic script told me. He was secretly photographed meeting a man and giving him a package.”

Miss Chiccarelli’s fist clenched. “I knew it!” she muttered.

“Great,” said Pete. “Jupe had a moment of realization; Miss Chiccarelli had always known it; and only I don’t understand anything again.”

“What do you think these photos are doing in Gregor Lansky’s chess set, Pete?” Jupe asked.

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

“Remember that Mr Lansky said that his life depended on this chess set? Mr Silverman, that’s what not only your father kept saying, but also Bishop Blake. And now it’s clear to me why—because Bishop Blake was only an agent hunter on the face of it. Actually, he was an agent himself. He’s a double agent!”

18. The Final Decision

Bob gasped. "You mean he was spying for the Russians himself? For both sides at the same time, so to speak?"

Jupiter nodded. "And these photos were proof of that. The other man is probably a Russian spy. In the hands of the right people, these photos would have convicted Bishop Blake and put him behind bars. For some reason, Blake knew or suspected that Lansky was in possession of the photos and that they were probably hidden in the chess set. That's why he wanted it so badly—not to destroy Gregor Lansky's life, but to save his own."

"And for Lansky, these photos were a kind of life insurance," Bob reflected aloud. "He knew he was relatively safe as long as he had the photos. Blake wouldn't risk turning him in as long as he feared Lansky would betray him. That was why the chess set was so important... for both of them."

Jupiter turned grimly to Miss Chiccarelli. "And you knew that all along."

Sam Chiccarelli seemed to realize that she could no longer keep anything secret. "I suspected it. We knew then that there was a mole in the CIA. I suspected Blake all along, but I lacked proof—evidence like those photos, for example."

"And Blake suspected that you were on his trail?" the First Investigator speculated.

She nodded.

"That's why he mentioned your name," Jupe said. "He thought he might not survive the accident... and he felt so haunted by you that you were the only one he could think of as the perpetrator."

"Yet I haven't bothered about him since the day I left my job," she defended herself.

"I believe you," Jupiter said. "Blake suffered from paranoia just as much as Gregor Lansky."

"An occupational disease," confirmed Miss Chiccarelli.

"When Pete asked him the next day at the hospital, Bishop Blake of course claimed to have never heard the name 'Sam Chiccarelli'. After all, he wouldn't want the three of us going to you and possibly revealing his secret that way... Anyway, you don't tell secrets unless you are forced to, do you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Another occupational disease. Besides, I believed you were working for a man I thought was a traitor... and who, as we now know, is one. And what's more, it was none of your damn business either!" But she smiled for the first time at these words and Jupiter even thought he saw something like recognition in her gaze.

"For your part, Mr Silverman, Mr Blake only gave Miss Chiccarelli's name because you threatened him."

"Threatened, well..." Griffin Silverman hesitated, but then nodded confessionally. "Yes, I probably threatened him."

"Of course you threatened him!" Pete exclaimed, "and not only that, you knocked me down!"

"You attacked me! I was just defending myself!"

"I just touched you on the shoulder! And you threatened us on the phone!"

"That was completely harmless. I just wanted you to stay out of this."

“And a few hours ago, you almost ran us over on the street!” continued Pete.

“That is really an exaggeration. I had the car under control the whole time and would never have risked hurting you. I just wanted the chess set back, which you, in turn, stole from me!”

“Hmm...” Pete grumbled in defeat.

“None of this would have happened at all if the chess set hadn’t ended up here at the salvage yard,” Jupiter remarked. “Why didn’t you actually take care of your aunt’s household clearance yourself?”

“I intended to,” Silverman explained, “but I haven’t had much contact with her in the last few years. When I was at her funeral, a neighbour told me that she would be taking care of everything. I didn’t care much about that, so I let her do it.”

“Typical Mrs Kretchmer,” Pete grumbled. “Where there’s something to get, she’s there at once.”

“So it was actually Mr Blake who broke into Mrs Hammontree’s house,” Jupiter stated. “He probably found out about your aunt’s death in the same way as our sports teacher Bradley, which was through the newspaper. Only Mr Blake was willing to risk more to get what he wanted. No wonder, there was more at stake for him.”

Bob heaved a deep sigh and dropped into an armchair, exhausted. “My head is throbbing. What are we going to do with all this secret knowledge?”

“You could free me, for example,” Griffin Silverman suggested.

Jupe saw no reason why he shouldn’t, but it was Sam Chiccarelli who pulled out a pocket knife and cut the bonds.

“Thank you,” Mr Silverman said.

But the question of what to do now had not been resolved.

“We can’t take Mr Blake to court now, can we?” asked Pete. “He’s an old man lying in hospital and if you ask me, he’s already paid enough through the fear he must have had all these years.”

“The law would see it differently,” Jupiter pointed out. He gave Sam Chiccarelli a questioning look.

“I no longer work for the CIA,” she said. “Remember what I told you when you came to my house? Bishop Blake was one of those who made everything so unpleasant—because everyone was shadowing everyone else and everyone else was playing a double game. Everyone felt watched and no one could be trusted. I’m glad to be out of that. And I have no intention of returning to settle old scores. So now I’m going to go home and go to bed. And if in the next few days an Inspector Cotta shows up at my door and questions me about anything, I’ll claim never to have seen any of you.”

She went to the door, opened it and turned around once more. “And whatever is stored on this microfilm is hopelessly out of date anyway and no one cares about it today. You can stick it in your scrapbook.” She threw the microfilm towards the desk, but as if by chance it bounced off the desk and straight into the waste basket. “Good night!”

Although it was now two o’clock in the morning and The Three Investigators were almost falling down from tiredness, they made a decision that very night.

Together with Mr Silverman, they went out to the salvage yard and set up a barbecue in a corner that was not visible from the Jones family’s house. Jupiter stowed the microfilm and the photos back in the chess set, and poured spirit on it. Then Mr Silverman set it on fire.

Silently, the four of them watched together as the flames slowly consumed the chess set.

“So what are we going to do about Mr Blake?” Pete asked into the crackling of the fire.

“I’ll send him a bouquet of flowers from Flower Power Malibu,” Mr Silverman said with a sideways glance at Bob. “On the little card, I will write that the chess set has been destroyed, and he has nothing more to fear.”

The Three Investigators nodded in agreement. Then they just watched the flames in silence as the secret of the chess grandmaster went up in smoke. It rose into the starry night sky and the wind blew away the last traces.

The next day, Eudora Kretchmer turned up at the salvage yard and demanded the seven thousand dollars that had been obtained for the chess set. But with Mathilda Jones, Mrs Kretchmer faced a mountain to climb. The battle of words, which Jupiter later called a ‘Clash of the Titans’, dragged on for half the afternoon. But after Aunt Mathilda’s promise of a generous donation to the Women’s Club’s Thanksgiving feast, the storm died down and the two disparate women sat at the verandah chatting for a long time. The cherry pie that Aunt Mathilda served even elicited a smile from Eudora Kretchmer.

Two days later, a nineteen-year-old man walked into Rocky Beach Police Department and confessed to knocking down an old man in a hit-and-run the previous Saturday. He went to court, but since he had turned himself in voluntarily, his sentence was lenient.

Bishop Blake moved away a few weeks after he was discharged from hospital. He left California and never returned.